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The Classical Barbarian in the *Íslendingasögur*

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Abstract

The *Íslendingasögur*, written in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, primarily describe the lives of Icelanders during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Many of these lives involve encounters with foreign peoples, both abroad and in Iceland, who are portrayed according to stereotypes which vary depending on the origins of those people. Notably, inhabitants of the places identified in the sagas as *Írland*, *Skotland* and *Vínland* are portrayed as being less civilized than the Icelanders themselves. This thesis explores the ways in which the *Íslendingasögur* emphasize this relative barbarity through descriptions of diet, material culture, style of warfare, and character. These characteristics are discussed in relation to parallel descriptions of Icelandic characters and lifestyle within the *Íslendingasögur*, and also in the context of a tradition in contemporary European literature which portrayed the Icelanders themselves as barbaric. Innovatively, comparisons are made with descriptions of barbarians in classical Roman texts, primarily Sallust, but also Caesar and Tacitus. Taking into account the availability and significance of classical learning in medieval Iceland, the comparison with Roman texts yields striking similarities between Roman and Icelandic ideas about barbarians. It is argued that the depiction of foreigners in the *Íslendingasögur* is almost identical to that of ancient Roman authors, and that the medieval Icelanders had both means and motive to use Roman ideas for inspiration in their own portrayal of the world. Ultimately it is argued that when the medieval Icelanders contemplated the peoples their Viking Age ancestors encountered around the world, they drew on classical ideas of the barbarian to complement the mix of oral tradition, literary inspiration and contemporary circumstance that otherwise form the *Íslendingasögur*.

PREFACE

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

This dissertation does not exceed the regulation length, **including** footnotes, references and appendices but **excluding** the bibliography and translations of quoted texts.

Signed:

William Hereward Norman

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Fǫgr er hlíðin.

INTRODUCTION

The Barbarian

The idea of the barbarian is a universal one throughout history and across cultures. The word itself is of Greek origin and onomatopoeic, from the incomprehensible 'bar-bar' sound of a foreign language to the Greek ear, but was adopted into Latin by the early Romans, and over the course of the last two thousand years has insinuated itself into every European language and language group. Icelandic adopted it fairly late, however, not until the eighteenth century, and as a result it is not used in the literature of medieval Iceland; even when directly faced with the word, as in translations of Sallust, medieval Icelandic writers found alternative ways of phrasing it, typically by using a proper noun instead.[1]

The popularity of the word speaks to the universality of its meaning, which is vague enough that it can be applied to almost any meeting of cultures, but at the same time sufficiently powerful that it appeals to all cultures. This is partly because the word 'barbarian' has a range of associations that allows it to adapt its meaning to many contexts. Etymologically speaking it indicates 'a foreigner, one whose language and culture differs from [that of] the speakers', but it also commonly has connotations of roughness, wildness and a lack of civilization, as well as an absence of culture, literary or otherwise. Historically it was used by the Greeks to refer, without necessarily any negative connotation, to non-Greeks. It was the Romans who first added a pejorative

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[1] 'Barbari', *Íslensk Orðsifjabók*, p. 41, though *barbarismus* is referred to as a Latin word and explained by Óláfr Þórðarson in a translation of Donatus' text *Barbarismus* in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, written around 1250, *Dritte Grammatische Abhandlung*, ch. 11 (ed. Krömmelbein, pp. 98–102), Males, 'Applied *Grammatica*', p. 267; see McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 207; Santini, 'Kenningar Donati', pp. 39–40). By comparison, forms of the word were used in Old French and Middle English at least as early as the fourteenth century, *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 76; there is only one equivalent generic term used in the *Íslendingasögur*, *óþjóðarfólk* ('un-people-people') in *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, ch. 1 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 300), translated as 'savages' in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders IV* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p. 448), though 'barbarians' would also be a fair figurative translation. Examples of *barbaros* being omitted or replaced with a proper noun occur in *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 31, and AM 226, ch. 28 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 148 [compare with *Bellum Jugurthinum* 102.15 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 176)]), in *Breta sögur*, chs. 25–6 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 269–70 [compare with *De gestis Britonum* 6.291 and 6.400 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, pp. 127 and 131)]) and in *Alexanders saga*, chs. 41, 49 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 41 and 49 [compare with *Alexandreis* 3.122 and 3.350 (ed. Colker, pp. 70 and 81)]); in other genres of Old Norse literature the adjective *barbarus* is often translated as *heiðinn* ('heathen'), McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 208; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 216.

element by specifically associating it with people who they perceived as being of a lower level of civilization than themselves; in Christian societies it has been used with similar intent for non-Christian societies.[2]

Although the word itself did not exist in Old Icelandic, it is apparent that every single one of these interpretations would have had meaning in a medieval Icelandic context, and that many of them would naturally have featured in any description of Icelanders encountering foreigners. Therefore, apart from the fact that the Latin word certainly was known, it follows that even without the word 'barbarian', the idea of the barbarian must nonetheless have existed in medieval Iceland. Examples of barbarian characterization are indeed a feature of the *Íslendingasögur*, as this thesis will show, it is just that they are not signposted with that label. Instead, each foreign people is labelled on almost every occasion with their own distinctive name, some of them, like *Írar* and *Skotar* the equivalent of the same names the people under discussion used, while names such as *Skrælingar* and *Finnar* were not identifications used by those peoples themselves.[3]

It follows from this refusal to generalize in the nomenclature that there is a limit to how far the authors of the sagas generalize in their portrayal of foreign others. Just as they give various 'barbarian' peoples their own names, they also give them their own independent, though often overlapping, set of characteristics. As a result this thesis is not a discussion of the treatment of 'The Barbarian' in the *Íslendingasögur*, for there is no one distinctive barbarian; rather it is a discussion of the treatment of several groups of foreigners who, in the way they are portrayed, broadly fit the idea of the barbarian. This idea encompasses, in summary, people who speak an unintelligible language, who have a culture that is different and subjectively inferior, whose behaviour is also portrayed as inferior and often immoral, and whose Christianity is doubtful or non-existent.[4]

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[2] 'Barbarian', *Oxford English Dictionary I*, p. 945; cf. Aalto, *Categorizing Otherness*, p. 13; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 207–9.

[3] Discussion of these names will follow later in this introduction.

[4] Óláfr Þórðarson, writing in the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, demonstrates that the thirteenth century Icelandic view of *barbarismus* was virtually identical to this summary, *Dritte Grammatische Abhandlung*, ch. 11 (ed. Krömmelbein, pp. 98–102); McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 207–8. Richard Cole's work on Jews and *Blámenn* in Old Norse Literature touches on many of these same points; see for example 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', p. 240; 'Racial Thinking', p. 21; material culture, language, diet and religion continue to this day to be defining features of ethnic identification (asserted or imposed), now generally separated from physical appearance (used to make racial distinctions), Fought, *Language and Ethnicity*, pp. 13–4.

In the *Íslendingasögur* there are four main groups of people who are portrayed as having most or all of these characteristics, and it is on these groups that I will focus in this thesis. These are the *Skotar*, *Írar*, *Skrælingar* and *Finnar*. During the course of this introduction I will first set out the literary context with respect to the *Íslendingasögur* themselves, then to relevant classical depictions of the barbarian, and to a few key contemporary European works that may have influenced Icelandic authors. The portrayal of the four peoples listed above will then be summarized with reference to every mention of these peoples in the *Íslendingasögur*, and the introduction will end with a discussion of Other Theory, which will inform my interpretation of portrayals of the barbarian throughout this thesis.

Having thus set out the source material, subject matter and theoretical approach, the analytical chapters of the thesis will move thematically across various aspects of the portrayal of barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur*. Starting with food and diet, then material culture, behaviour in battle and finally character, each chapter will discuss the sagas' portrayal of the barbarian both in its own right, and also in the wider context of European and especially Classical literature. The importance of Roman depictions of barbarians lies partly in their potential as direct models for Icelandic literature, but also simply in the striking similarities they have to Icelandic depictions.

It is natural in our post-Renaissance world, following the 'rediscovery' of the Classical world, to take the Roman 'idea of the barbarian' as our basic model, but there is no obvious reason why the medieval Icelandic 'idea of the barbarian' should have so much in common with the Roman one.[5] That it does implies one of three things: the medieval Icelanders had more direct access to Roman literature than can ever be proven from surviving material; or that there was an unbroken tradition of Othering the barbarian in European thought and writing, not dependent on any particular texts but permeating through all of them; or that human society, regardless of when or where that society is, naturally and instinctively Others the unknown and the foreign in similar ways. With this in mind, it is my hope that this thesis will provide a thorough guide to barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur*, as well as offering a variety of explanations for the

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[5] It is interesting to note for comparison that debates about what characteristics constituted a barbarian, and whether the Roman idea of the barbarian was a fair one, became, in the context of encounters with the Other in the New World, a feature of Spanish educated discourse in the sixteenth century, Lupher, *Romans in a New World*, pp. 296–7; Lupher's *Romans in a New World* more generally illustrates the significance which Classical texts had for sixteenth-century Europeans in forming their worldview and especially for giving context to their encounters with Native Americans.

origins of their portrayal. Some of these are historical, others literary, some grounded in certainty and others more speculative.

Sources

Íslendingasögur

The *Íslendingasögur*, known as the *Sagas of the Icelanders* in English and commonly referred to as the 'Family sagas', will be the primary texts used in this thesis. Written in Iceland in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the forty *Íslendingasögur* are set in historical locations in the real world, often using the names of people who seem really to have lived some two to three hundred years earlier. The stories may be conscious fictions or adaptations of oral traditions, but the setting is historical, and though either lack of knowledge or literary convention mean that voyages abroad in particular are often romanticized and formulaic, many of the lives and events set in Iceland itself are presented with the appearance, at least, of realism.[6]

The veneer of historical accuracy that is characteristic of the *Íslendingasögur* cannot tell us accurately what the truth of Viking Age Iceland was, but it gives an excellent insight into what the Icelanders of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries *thought* it was or should have been like.[7] This in turn reveals much about the views of the latter, which is in effect the primary topic of this thesis: did classical learning influence later medieval Icelandic views of the foreign peoples their Viking Age ancestors encountered at home and abroad? Understanding the society in which the sagas were created gives insight into a number of other factors which doubtlessly affected the composition of the sagas, and allows us to view the importance of classical learning in a balanced way and in the context of other influences.

From a practical perspective, saga writing required prosperity and education.[8] The time required to create a manuscript was substantial, and the materials, particularly calf

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[6] Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Vínland Sagas', p. 39; Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 230–1; Clover, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 241–5; Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga*, pp. 71–6; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', p. 105; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 255; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 204–6; on the historicity of the Vínland sagas see Gísli Sigurðsson, 'Orality and Literacy', pp. 295–300; on the symbolism of the journey abroad see Glørstad, 'Homeland', pp. 167–8.

[7] Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', pp. 1–2; Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', p. 20; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', pp. 102-3 and 105–6; cf. Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 253–4, and on the subject of the Vínland sagas, 283–4.

[8] Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 166–9; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Society and Literature', p. 32; Lönnroth, 'Sponsors, Writers, and Readers', pp. 3–5; Lönnroth, *European Sources*, pp. 12–3.

skins for vellum, were expensive due to the quantity needed for a manuscript, perhaps fifty to one hundred or more, so one can assume that only the wealthier of landowners had the resources necessary to sponsor the committing of the *Íslendingasögur* to vellum.[9] We should, therefore, expect and be wary of an elitist worldview in the *Íslendingasögur*, and sure enough, most of the sagas focus on landowners and their families, with tenants, servants and slaves playing minor and often unflattering roles. This awareness of social status can confuse the impression the sagas give of the medieval Icelandic view of foreigners where those foreigners have an association with low social status. Examples of this problem occur especially with regard to *skozkr* and *írskr* characters who are often portrayed as slaves, servants, or lower-status companions; it is often unclear which elements of a character's portrayal reflect their geographical origins and which their social status. Indeed, mostly positive portrayals of the aristocracy of both *Skotland* and *Írland*, as will be discussed in this thesis, indicate that social status was for most authors more definitive than 'nationality'. Awareness of this issue is therefore essential for establishing an informed view of stereotypes about foreigners in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Literacy and Christianity were irrevocably intertwined in medieval Iceland, having arrived together, and they remained so throughout the medieval period.[10] Priests would have been the first literate Icelanders, and laypersons with an education would quite likely have received that education in a religious context, whether at home or in an ecclesiastical centre.[11] A Christian interest might therefore be expected in the sagas, as well as evidence of Christian learning.[12] This is apparent in a number of the *Íslendingasögur*, though interestingly it is not as pervasive as the elitism mentioned above.[13] This seems to reflect a picture of Iceland in which chieftains could be motivated by religious reasons, but could also encourage religious individuals and institutions to promote the chieftains' own secular agendas, and in which the same families were often

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[9] Árni Björnsson, 'Prerequisites for Saga Writing', p. 53; Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, pp. 11–2; Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 47–8; for a detailed description of medieval Icelandic book-making see Soffía Guðný Guðmundsdóttir and Laufey Guðnadóttir, 'Book production', pp. 45–61.

[10] Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 2, 21–2 and 55–6; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Church and written culture', pp. 13–23; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 115.

[11] Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Church and written culture', p. 20; Lönnroth, 'Sponsors, Writers, and Readers', p. 6; Hermann, 'Literacy', p. 35; Lönnroth, *European Sources*, pp. 11–3.

[12] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 166–9; Sverrir Tómason, *Formálar Íslenskra Sagnaritara*, pp. 35–6; Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 104–7 and 113–6; cf. Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*, esp. pp. 101–29, and English summary pp. 363–8.

[13] Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 109–13.

prominent in both secular and religious contexts.[14] When one considers in addition that though some ecclesiastical centres were large enough to be independently wealthy, others were attached to secular households and would have depended on the householder for maintenance and to provide the expensive materials needed for practicing their literacy, it is clear that the presentation of religion in the *Íslendingasögur* must be the result of several complementary and sometimes competing agendas.[15] These agendas too complicate the portrayal of foreigners, especially where religion plays a role in characterization, such as with Christian *írskr* settlers in Iceland.[16]

A third important factor for understanding the context in which a number of the sagas were written, and which could influence their view of foreigners, was the influence of the Norwegian crown in Iceland during the thirteenth century, culminating with the imposition of Norwegian rule in 1262–4.[17] From 1220 onwards Iceland was under increasing pressure to submit to Norway, and this is reflected in the various attitudes the great sagas of the thirteenth century reveal towards Norwegian kings.[18] Written in the early part of the century, *Egils saga*, with its central feud between the family of Egill and the kings and queens of Norway, has often been regarded as challenging and criticizing Norwegian royal influence, though Theodore M. Andersson adds that there may be something in the text for a Norwegian audience too in the reluctant but gradual acceptance by Egill of royal authority as the saga progresses.[19] *Laxdæla saga*, from the middle of the thirteenth century, shortly before Norwegian rule was imposed, is consistently positive in its portrayal of Norwegian royals, though again there is some ambiguity about the author's purpose due to the even higher extolment of rulers in Ireland, Scotland, and Byzantium, which Elizabeth Rowe suggests can be read as a

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[14] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Society and Literature', pp. 26–8 and 33; Lönnroth, 'Sponsors, Writers, and Readers', pp. 5–10; Hermann, 'Literacy', pp. 39–40; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'State formation', p. 76.

[15] Árni Björnsson, 'Prerequisites for Saga Writing', p. 55; Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, p. 233; Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', pp. 110–1; Rowe, 'Review of Ármann Jakobsson', p. 95; Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 169–70; Lönnroth, *European Sources*, pp. 14–5; Helgi Þorláksson, 'Historical Background', pp. 147–8; Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland*, pp. 112–32, especially 125; Benedikt Eyþórsson, 'Reykholt and Church Centres', pp. 105–16; on the power balance between church and chieftains and the importance of literacy in this context, see Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 60–6, especially pp. 64–5 on the influence of chieftains over the church.

[16] Sayers, 'Management of the Celtic Fact', pp. 137–8.

[17] Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 165–6; Middel, '*Alexanders Saga*', p. 122; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'State formation', pp. 69–70.

[18] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', pp. 111–2; Margaret Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', pp. 55–6; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 101–3.

[19] Andersson, 'Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas', pp. 2 and 102–18.

challenge to the Norwegian assumption that Iceland's ancestral associations were all with Norway.[20] *Njáls saga*, written some twenty years after the beginning of Norwegian rule, takes a more cynical view of life in general, including Norwegian royalty, in which the peaceful efforts of good men are continuously frustrated by malefactors.[21] It is less interested altogether in interactions with Norway than either of the earlier sagas, and is therefore perhaps more challenging from a Norwegian perspective than *Egils saga*. As Andersson writes, 'Iceland is isolated and focused more sharply than elsewhere. It is no longer seen as emerging from a colonial period and maintaining ongoing ties and ongoing issues with the mother country […] In *Njáls saga*, Iceland has acquired more independence, toward the end even something approaching a national perspective.'[22] However the attitude towards Norway in these sagas is interpreted, it is clear that it was a major concern for the authors, making it likely that contemporary relations with Norway played a part in influencing the depiction of rulers in other countries in the sagas.[23] So far as Iceland was itself considered peripheral or Other compared to Norway by the Icelanders themselves, the Icelandic portrayal of the Other abroad can be read as a response to their relationship with Norway, especially where claims relating to civilization are concerned.[24]

A final issue in seeking literary explanations for the portrayal of the barbarian Other in the *Íslendingasögur* is the probability that some details of the depictions may in fact be historically accurate representations of the Viking Age, passed down through oral tradition to the thirteenth century, while others may be features of the Viking Age which were still current when the sagas were written.[25] Although there is clearly much invention, there is also much which is realistic, and it would not do to explain away fact and fiction alike with literary solutions.[26] For example, I will argue that the portrayal of the *Skrælingar* owes part of its background to classical ideas about how barbarians lived

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[20] Andersson, 'Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas', pp. 2 and 146–8; Rowe, personal communication and forthcoming; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', p. 153.
[21] Andersson, 'Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas', p. 2.
[22] Andersson, 'Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas', pp. 200–3; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'State formation', p. 71.
[23] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', p. 149; cf. the portrayal of English rulers, Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 80–2 and 101–7; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', pp. 5–7.
[24] Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', pp. 55–6 and 67; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', p. 17.
[25] Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 91–3; Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 49–69; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 204–6.
[26] Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 253–63 and 69.

and behaved, as well as to ancient and enduring stereotypes about the Other, but the descriptions of the *Skrælingar* do also match in several respects historical details about Native American tribes living in the Newfoundland and Labrador area at the time.[27] Similarly, descriptions of grapes and wheat growing wild in Vínland in the Vínland sagas probably owe much to Christian ideas of earthly paradise as well as to the hungry reality of later medieval Greenland and Iceland, but as numerous scholars have painstakingly demonstrated in quests to prove the historicity of the sagas, there is also the possibility of rational and historical explanations for their presence there.[28] So although this thesis is concerned with literary explanations and will avoid judgements on historicity, it must be read with an awareness that in many cases literary concerns may not be the only, or even the most important, reason why barbarians are portrayed the way they are. Practical, religious, political, and even historical realities as they were understood in Iceland at the time must all be allowed for. Fortunately — otherwise the Icelanders might as well have simply been copying out Sallust.

The three sagas mentioned above, *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Laxdæla saga*, will all be important sources for the purposes of this thesis; other key texts include *Grænlendinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða* (probably written around 1200–1230, but possibly up to a century later, *Fóstbræðra saga* (probably before 1200 but possibly as late as 1300), *Kormáks saga* (before 1220), *Eyrbyggja saga* (mid thirteenth century), *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, (1270–1280), and *Vatnsdæla saga* (1270–1280), though I will refer occasionally to a number of other sagas which also feature interactions with the barbarian Other.[29]

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[27] Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", pp. 20–1; Odess, Loring, Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', pp. 200–5.

[28] Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 272–8; Wallace, 'L'Anse aux Meadows', pp 118–29; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', pp. 91–3; Páll Bergþórsson, *Wineland Millennium*, see for example the photos and captions in this work.

[29] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', pp. 114–6; cf. Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 234–49; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 217–98; Mundal, 'Dating of the Oldest Sagas', pp. 31–54; Andersson, 'Redating *Fóstbræðra saga*', pp. 55–76. Like the Vínland sagas (the dating of which will be discussed in the introductory section on the *Skrælingar*), the dating of *Fóstbræðra saga* is hotly debated, with Turville–Petre dating it to the 'first decade of the thirteenth century' and Jónas Kristjánsson arguing for almost a century later, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 278–9; cf. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas', pp. 247–8; more recently, based on the genealogy of Álfr, Rowe suggests a date before 1200 for *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Vikings in the West*, pp. 221–2; in 2013 Andersson provided further textual evidence to support an early dating, 'Redating *Fóstbræðra saga*', pp. 57–72; a recent discussion of some of the key dating debates and summary of scholarship on the subject can be found in Callow, 'Dating and Origins', pp. 15–33.

Classical Learning

The 'barbarian' was a familiar concept in classical learning. Othering of neighbouring societies was practised by the ancient Egyptians (according to Herodotus), and certainly by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and was used in various different ways for political and literary ends.[30] Some of these classical examples were transmitted almost intact into medieval Iceland, while others played a part in establishing the framework from which all medieval European ethnographical and historical writing developed. Where there are similarities with Icelandic medieval writing it is right to consider that through wider European culture as well as immediately through popular Latin texts, the learning of the ancient world influenced medieval Icelandic thought.[31] Latin learning was an essential part of the Icelandic education in church schools in medieval Iceland, and the literate and well-educated authors of the sagas must have been a product of the church's school system, either directly or indirectly.[32]

Figures given in the *Diplomatarium Islandicum* suggest that there may have been as many as 400 educated clergymen in Iceland during the late medieval period, and they would in turn have been responsible for educating the literate lay community.[33] It is well known that Latin texts were used as examples of grammar and rhetoric in the education of priests in Iceland, and an oft-quoted example from *Jóns saga* about a young trainee priest being reprimanded for reading Ovid's racy work *De Arte Amandi* as early as about 1100 demonstrates that a variety of Latin texts were fairly common and attainable.[34] Inevitably, historical and ethnographical ideas would have been transmitted along with the more technical subjects of grammar and rhetoric. It is therefore likely that classical ideas such as those held by the Romans about barbarians will have entered Icelandic popular thought directly through the school system. Evidence from the *biskupa sögur* and the presence of numerous Icelandic names in church records and registration lists

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[30] Cf. the Greek historian Herodotus' assertion that the Egyptians considered that the Greeks wrote in the wrong direction, Herodotus, *Histories* 2.36 (ed. Romm, trans. Mensch, p. 95).
[31] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', p. 113; Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 44–55; Lassen, 'Indigenous and Latin Literature', p. 74; Springer, 'Mediaeval Pilgrim Routes', pp. 93–4.
[32] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 166–9; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 192.
[33] Sverrir Tómason, *Formálar Íslenskra Sagnaritara*, pp. 35–6.
[34] Sverrir Tómason, *Formálar Íslenskra Sagnaritara*, pp. 24; Dronke, 'Classical Influence', p. 146; Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 7–8; White, *Non-Native Sources*, pp. 18 and 23–4; Lassen, 'Indigenous and Latin Literature', p. 76; Ommundsen, 'Traces of Latin Education', pp. 244 and 258.

across Europe show that some Icelanders would have been familiar with a much wider range of classical texts than were available in Iceland, and many books could also have been imported by Icelanders travelling and studying abroad; as a result a significant part of the literature produced in the twelfth century in Iceland was written in Latin.[35] This type of learning would have been concentrated at places such as the cathedral establishments at Skálholt and Hólar, and church-farms such as Oddi and Haukadalur.[36] At the monastery at Helgafell in western Iceland the evidence of scribal hands and manuscript illustrations has been used to show that texts available there included *Íslendingasögur* such as *Laxdœla saga*, as well as classically inspired works including *Rómverja saga* and *Alexanders saga*, and probably also the manuscript *Flateyjarbók*, which itself contains works of both types, including extracts from Adam of Bremen's writing, *Grænlendinga saga*, and a single chapter of *Eiríks saga rauða*.[37]

The importance of Rome as a symbol of civilization, and therefore as both a source of inspiration and a model to aspire to, is demonstrated by the following short extract from Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum*, and the Icelandic translation of it from *Rómverja saga*:

> […] peruenit ad Gaetulos, genus hominum ferum incultumque et eo tempore ignarum nominis Romani.[38]

> […] he came to the Gaetulians, a savage and uncultivated race of men who at that time were ignorant of the name of the Romans.

> […] ok kom fram til Getulos manna. su þioð uar grimm ok osiðuð ok kunnu þæir litla skyn a Romuerivm.[39]

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[35] Frank, 'Classical Scholarship', pp. 140–2; Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 8–10; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Church and written culture', pp. 17–20; Hermann, 'Literacy', p. 35; Lassen, 'Indigenous and Latin Literature', p. 75; Gottskálk Jensson, 'Lost Latin Literature', pp. 150–6; Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 115–7; Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, 'On the Sallust Translation', pp. 270–6; Cole, 'Hebrew in Runic Inscriptions', pp. 39–40; one Icelandic writer thought to have studied abroad in England and France is the anonymous scholar behind the *First Grammatical Treatise*, Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 44–5, Hreinn Benediktsson, *First Grammatical Treatise*, pp. 189–200; in the fourteenth century Bishop Jón Halldórsson also studied abroad, and men such as Haukr Erlendsson showed an interest in European literature and learning, Springer, 'Mediaeval Pilgrim Routes', pp. 93–5; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', p. 28.

[36] Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 117.

[37] Lassen, 'Indigenous and Latin Literature', pp. 81 and 86; Leeuw van Weenen, *Alexanders saga*, pp. 5–7.

[38] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 80.1 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 140).

[39] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 22 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 106–7).

> […] and arrived with the Gaetulians. That people were fierce and barbarous and knew little of the Romans.

Ignorance of Rome is given as an indication of how barbaric the Gaetulians are. It is interesting that the Icelandic work repeats this proof of barbarity, and implies that they too associate Rome and knowledge of Rome with civilization, and therefore wish themselves to be judged on this measure of civilization in the eyes of the world. By their own admission, a Rome-orientated world view must have been considered to be associated with high civilization in medieval Iceland, and therefore aspired towards.[40]

Sallust stands out as a classical author who was indisputably known in thirteenth-century Iceland. The evidence for this lies in *Rómverja saga*, an Icelandic work which is partly direct translation and partly a paraphrase of texts by the Roman authors Sallust and Lucan. Sallust and Lucan were both popular in medieval Europe, with Sallust's texts in particular providing instruction in grammar and rhetoric, exemplars for speech writing, and inspiration when medieval writers wanted to portray 'the habits of peoples whom they regarded as less civilized than themselves, the Bretons, the Welsh or the Slavs in particular.'[41] In Norway he was one of several classical sources used by Theodoricus Monachus in combination with Icelandic poetry, and Theodoricus was surely not the only early Norse author to draw inspiration from both traditions.[42] Sallust wrote a history of Rome, but he was and is best known for his two monographs, one on the subject of Catiline's conspiracy against the Roman Republic, and another on the Roman war with Jugurtha of Numidia, and it is translations of these two texts which form the bulk of the first two of three main sections of *Rómverja saga*.

Rómverja saga survives partially in half a dozen manuscripts, most extensively in the early fourteenth-century AM 595 a-b 4°, and in the mid fourteenth-century AM 226 fol., together with other biblical and classically inspired texts including *Stjórn*, *Alexanders saga*, and *Gyðinga saga*. Comparison with *Sverris saga* suggests however that it was originally written in the second half of the twelfth century, possibly in the monastery at Þingeyrar, and that at least two copies were made, as AM 226 is not descended from AM

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[40] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Centre and Periphery', pp. 918–24.
[41] Smalley, 'Sallust in the Middle Ages', pp. 168–71; Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, p. lxxvii.
[42] Dronke, 'Classical Influence', p. 147.

595.[43] Similarly, apparent borrowing from *Rómverja saga* into *Alexanders saga* implies that at some point a copy of *Rómverja saga* became available at the monastery at Þykkvabær.[44] Borrowing in *Veraldar saga* suggests both that *Rómverja saga* must have been written some time before 1190, and that a version of it may have been composed or known in either the school at Oddi or the school at Skálholt.[45] It seems safe to conclude then that during the main period when the *Íslendingasögur* were being written, the thirteenth century, there was at least one Latin version each of Sallust's two monographs on Jugurtha and Catiline, and of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, and at least two manuscripts of *Rómverja saga* in circulation in Iceland.[46] Furthermore, Sallust and Lucan's writing must have been popular or it would not have been worth translating into the vernacular, which suggests that the *Bellum Jugurthinum*, *De Coniuratione Catilinae*, and Lucan's *Pharsalia* were probably available more widely in one or both languages than the surviving evidence can prove. This may also indicate that they appealed to a literate secular audience who were better equipped to read and write in Old Icelandic than Latin, such as the authors of the *Íslendingasögur*.

The translation in the earlier manuscript, AM 595, is a faithful rendition of Sallust's text that is almost a word-for-word match with the Latin. However, in a couple of places words are changed to give them more meaning in an Icelandic context. For example, usually the Gauls are referred to as *Gallia*, but on one occasion when describing the eagerness of Gauls for battle *Norðmenn* is substituted instead.[47] The translation of Lucan is much more abbreviated and paraphrased, as one might expect of poetry being rendered into prose, and in this section of the work the Gauls are labelled *Saxaherr* instead, an attempt to make the text more relevant that has slightly different nuances.[48] In the later manuscript, AM 226, there are some direct translations, but much of the text is summarized and abbreviated, and again words indicating nationality are often substituted for names with more meaning in medieval Iceland: *Franz* and *Franzeisar* for *Gallia* and its inhabitants, *Serkland* and *Serkir* for Africa and Africans, and *Bláland hit mikla* for

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[43] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, p. cxcv.
[44] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, pp. cxcvii–iii.
[45] Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', p. 169.
[46] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, 'Sources and Composition', pp. 203–7.
[47] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, pp. cl and 193.
[48] 'Saxon army'.

Ethiopia.[49] *Víkingr* is used for soldiers (good and bad) and the Egyptian king Ptolemy instead of the Latin *miles*, *pirata* and *tyrannus* respectively.[50]

In short, Sallust was known in Iceland, and elsewhere in Europe his description and characterization of the Moors and Numidians was used as inspiration for politicized geographical and historical texts in which barbarity and a perceived state of lesser civilization were ascribed to peoples in northern and western Europe.[51] It seems quite possible that the Icelanders too would have found much to interest and inspire them in Sallust's depictions of barbarians, and *Rómverja saga* will play a central role in this thesis.

Lucan's *Pharsalia* was therefore also known in Iceland, though there is less ethnographical detail than Sallust provides, and much of what there is in the poem appears to have been edited out when the author of *Rómverja saga* abbreviated and translated it from Latin verse into Old Icelandic prose. However, a few interesting and relevant phrases did survive the adaptation, notably in references to the treacherous nature of the Moors, Libyans, and Carthaginians.

The presence of works by other Roman authors that one might expect to have existed in medieval Iceland alongside Sallust, such as Caesar and Cicero, is harder to prove. Certainly the works of both these authors were known elsewhere in medieval Europe, and since Caesar features as a historical figure in *Rómverja saga* and *Veraldar saga* one might expect the medieval Icelanders to have shown an interest in his writing if given the opportunity.[52] In Caesar's case this is potentially valuable, as the descriptions of his wars against the 'barbarians' in Gaul and Britain contain ethnographic details of the same sort Sallust and the Icelanders are interested in.[53] Despite the lack of any tangible link it may therefore still be possible to posit knowledge of Caesar's writings where there are close parallels. In the case of Tacitus, whose writings offer promising material for this subject,

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[49] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, p. clxxxvii.

[50] 'Soldier'; 'pirate'; 'tyrant', ed., Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, *Rómverja saga*, p. clx.

[51] Smalley, 'Sallust in the Middle Ages', p. 171.

[52] Caesar is a recurring character in the *Pharsalia* section of *Rómverja saga*, and has his life summarized in *Veraldar saga* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 48–50). It seems Caesar the man was better known than his writings, though his *Bellum Gallicum* was certainly available as a source in parts of medieval Europe; however, as in the thirteenth century *Faits des Romains*, his authorship of it was not always recognized, Suerbaum, 'Middle Ages', pp. 317–8.

[53] When Spanish and then other European explorers and conquistadors reached the Americas they often turned to Classical sources including Caesar, Sallust and Tacitus to give context to (and to exaggerate) their own achievements, as well as to understand their relationship with the 'barbarians' they encountered there, Lupher, *Romans in a New World*, pp. 8–42, 226–9 and 295–7.

there is no evidence that he was known in medieval Europe, though it is conceivable that traces of his writings may have reached Iceland via Adam of Bremen, who seems to have unwittingly picked up fragments of Tacitus from the ninth-century author Rudolf of Fulda.[54] However many steps of removal there are between Tacitus and the Icelanders, it is evident that they shared a number of views about barbarians, so if 'influenced' is too strong a word, at least Tacitus contributed early on to a shared European discourse which was familiar to the Icelanders.

Post-classical authors such as Bede and Isidore were also known in Iceland, both of which were used (amongst other Latin sources) by the composer of *Veraldar saga* before 1190, and there seem to be echoes of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in Snorri's *Heimskringla*.[55] The *einfœtingr* in *Eiríks saga rauða* suggests its author knew Isidore, who included monopods in his list of monsters, though Isidore's beasts may have been known to medieval Icelanders indirectly through encyclopedias such as the works edited under the title of *Alfræði Íslenzk*.[56] The *Alfræði Íslenzk* collection itself, which features (amongst other learned subjects) a history of several Roman emperors, demonstrates the interest of medieval Icelanders in ancient Rome.[57] Finally, many works of an ecclesiastical and hagiographical nature show direct Latin influence, as do *Trójumanna saga* and *Gyðinga saga*.[58] The overall picture is one in which at least some educated Icelanders were familiar with classical authors and ideas and would inevitably have been influenced in their own writing by them.[59]

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[54] Harris, *Race and Ethnicity*, p. 23; Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book*, pp. 62–4; Smalley, 'Sallust in the Middle Ages', p. 172; for a view that Adam used Tacitus directly see Bolton, 'A Textual Historical Response', pp. 61–76.

[55] Sverrir Tómason, *Formálar Íslenskra Sagnaritara*, pp. 39 and 394; Jakob Benediktsson, *Veraldar saga*, pp. XLV–LIII; cf. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, pp. 129–33; Cole, 'Racial Thinking', pp. 29–30.

[56] *Alfræði Íslenzk*, vol. 1 (ed. Kaalund, p. 35); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 179; Schlauch, *Romance in Iceland*, pp. 44–5; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 71–2 and 77–8.

[57] *Alfræði Íslenzk*, vol. 3 (ed. Kaalund, pp. 12–6).

[58] Wellendorf, 'Ecclesiastical Literature', pp. 48–54; Jakob Benediktsson, *Veraldar saga*, p. XLVII; Louis-Jensen, *Trójumanna saga* pp. XIX–XX and XXVI–XXVIII; Wolf, *Gyðinga saga*, pp. lxxxviii–c.

[59] Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 69 and 72. A parallel example to my study that supports this statement is Kim Middel's study of the classical heritage of *Alexanders saga*, in which she argues that Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy is consciously represented in the Icelandic saga of Alexander, having survived in transmission from the classical Latin of Quintus Curtius Rufus through Walter of Châtillon's *Alexandreis* and into Old Norse, '*Alexanders Saga*', pp. 121–48.

Contemporary Latin Works

To gain a closer understanding of the 'barbarian Other' in the *Íslendingasögur* it is also worth considering a selection of near-contemporary medieval works from outside Iceland which would have been familiar or interesting to well-educated thirteenth-century Icelanders.[60] These are texts which will have contributed to the worldview of these people, either by giving information about other peoples, or by influencing the way Icelanders saw themselves in relation to the rest of the world.[61] Geoffrey of Monmouth's *De gestis Britonum* was certainly known in Iceland, and it seems likely that other northwestern European authors who wrote histories of the region such as Theodoricus Monachus (who himself used a wide selection of classical texts), Adam of Bremen and Saxo Grammaticus, as well as the *Historia Norwegie*, would have been read either in Iceland, or when Icelanders travelled abroad to Norway and beyond.[62] Even if some of them were never actually read by Icelanders, the attitudes expressed in them would certainly have been encountered and have influenced the Icelandic world view.

The Icelandic understanding of Britain and Ireland was influenced by Geoffrey of Monmouth's work *De gestis Britonum*, which had been translated into Old Norse and was known as *Breta sögur*, the earliest extant version of which is in the early fourteenth-century manuscript *Hauksbók*, AM 544 4to.[63] The Latin text, however, must have been available in Iceland by the early thirteenth century, scarcely fifty years after Geoffrey wrote it, since a Norse version of Geoffrey's *Prophetie Merlini* from the *Historia* was probably composed in the late twelfth century, and no later than 1219; *Breta sögur* is probably of a similar age.[64] *De gestis Britonum* contains numerous references to barbaric invaders of Britain including the Irish, Picts, Saxons and Scandinavians, offering a uniformly negative depiction of all these peoples which may well have influenced

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[60] See Lönnroth on the similarities between Icelandic and European literature in the medieval period, *European Sources*, pp. 6–11.

[61] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', p. 22; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Emergence of the North', p. 80; see further discussion of the Icelandic worldview in the final subsection of the Introduction, on Icelanders as the Other.

[62] Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 169–71 and 201–2.

[63] Baccianti, 'Translating England', pp. 562–3.

[64] Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Transmission of *Historia Regum Britannie*', pp. 233–4; Kalinke, 'Arthur, King of Iceland', pp. 8–9; cf. Jucknies' suggestion that *Breta sögur* could have been composed outside of Iceland, 'Tracing Saints and Bishops', pp. 268–9; Lassen, 'Indigenous and Latin Literature', p. 75.

Icelandic ideas about who barbarians were and how they behaved.[65] The significance of these depictions in an Icelandic context is proven by the fact that the *Hauksbók* version of *Breta sögur* deliberately adapts the way Saxons and Scandinavians are presented to make it less negative.[66]

Similarities between the writing of Adam of Bremen in the 1070s and the depiction of Vínland in the Vínland sagas are suggestive of some shared knowledge, notably the name Vínland itself, as well as descriptions of grain and grapes growing wild there, which the next chapter on food and diet will discuss in detail.[67] Similarities between the depiction of two *skozkr* slaves in *Eiríks saga rauða* and Adam's *Skritefini*, and of the trading of cloth for valuable furs with less civilized peoples in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* may also be significant, as will be discussed in the chapter on material culture. There is some evidence that the author of *Íslendingabók* used Adam's *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, and there is an Icelandic synopsis of his account of the conversion of Denmark, which can, however, only be dated back as far as AM 415 4to, composed around 1310.[68] Perhaps most significant, however, is the depiction of Iceland itself in Adam's work:

> Est autem insula permaxima, ita ut populos infra se multos contineat, qui solo pecorum fetu vivunt eorumque vellere teguntur; nullae ibi fruges, minima lignorum copia. Propterea in subterraneis habitant speluncis, communi tecto [et victu] et strato gaudentes cum pecoribus suis. Itaque in simplicitate sancta vitam peragentes, cum nihil amplius quaerant quam natura concedit, laeti

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[65] Cf. Hahn, 'Difference the Middle Ages Makes', p. 8.

[66] Baccianti, 'Translating England', pp. 578–81 and 587.

[67] Tschan, trans., *Adam of Bremen*, p. xxvii; on the name 'Vínland', which some historians have rendered 'Vinland' ('pasture-land'), I follow Wallace Ferguson's persuasive argument on both philological and practical grounds in favour of the long 'í' and the meaning 'wine-land', 'L'Anse aux Meadows and Vínland', p. 142; cf. Magnús Stefánsson, 'Vínland or Vinland', pp. 319–29; Crozier, 'Arguments Against the **Vinland* Hypothesis', pp. 331–7.

[68] Tschan, trans., *Adam of Bremen*, p. xviii; Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, pp. xxiv–v; *Íslendingabók* clearly does not, however, use Adam as a source for its section on *Vínland*, so if Adam's version and the Vínland sagas are related it is directly, or at least, not through *Íslendingabók*; *Hungrvaka*, a collection of bishops' sagas written in the early thirteenth century, may have been influenced either directly or indirectly by Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 202–4; Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 308–12; White, *Non-Native Sources*, pp. 3 and 40–1; *Handrit.is*, 'AM 415 4to', http://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0415 [viewed 22 March, 2016].

> possunt dicere cum apostolo, 'habentes victum et vestitum, his contenti simus.'[69]
>
> However this island is so large that it sustains on it many people, who live only on the offspring of their livestock and are clothed in their fleeces; no crops are there, and a meagre supply of wood. Therefore they live in underground caves, rejoicing in sharing shelter, nourishment and bed with their beasts. And so living to the end in holy simplicity, and asking nothing more than nature gives, they are able to say joyfully with the apostle, 'having food and clothing, let us be happy.'

Although he presents this lifestyle as an example of Christian virtue, one could hardly expect the Icelanders to be flattered by a description that makes them appear so barbaric.[70] If Adam of Bremen's ideas about standards of living in Iceland were in general circulation among the educated people of northern Europe then it is reasonable to expect to see an indignant or defensive reaction to them in Icelandic writings.

Like the *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, written in the first decades of the thirteenth century, combines recognition of Icelandic intelligence and temperance with the implied criticism and othering that can be found in his description of Iceland as 'obsoletę admodum habitationis tellus rerumque ueri fidem excedentium et insolitorum euentum miraculis prędicanda.'[71] The petrifying properties of air and water there, as well as poisonous fountains, and others that are as good as ale, fire which burns water but not wood, and rocks that move by themselves are listed together with equally wondrous (though, as it happens, fairly accurate) descriptions of geysirs, glaciers, volcanoes and icebergs. This description makes Iceland a place of fantasy, otherness and marginality, which is emphasized by its location as 'occidentali insula […] magno circunfusa reperitur Oceano'.[72] Most Icelandic texts, by contrast, say little or nothing of

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[69] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 36 (ed. Schmeidler, p. 272).
[70] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Emergence of the North', p. 80.
[71] 'A land of very dilapidated dwellings, and facts exceeding belief and rare occurrences and miracles that must be proclaimed', Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* Praefatio.ii.7 (ed. Friis-Jensen, p. 80).
[72] 'A western island […] found surrounded by the great Ocean', Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* Praefatio.i.4, ii.7 (ed. Friis-Jensen, pp. 74–6 and 80); cf. Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes* I, Preface 5, 7–8 (ed. H. E. Davidson, pp. 5 and 7–8).

these topographical marvels, but instead portray the Icelandic landscape as beautiful, bountiful, and mundane — a place for civilized people rather than barbarians.[73] There are also direct models for barbarian behaviour in the *Gesta Danorum*, such as the depiction of *Britanni* greedily abandoning a pursuit to gather gold, and *Scotti* fleeing battle at the first sight of a Danish army.[74] Saxo himself exemplifies the medieval historian's interest in using and imitating Classical models, especially Virgil, but also Valerius Maximus, Martianus Capella, Justin, Horace, Ovid and Cicero.[75] However, as it is uncertain whether Saxo's work was known in Iceland, the more general northern European attitude towards Iceland that he represents, and which well-traveled Icelanders certainly would have been aware of, is more useful than specific examples that may or may not have influenced Icelandic authors.

The two Norwegian texts, *Historia Norwegie* and Theodoricus Monachus' *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*, were both composed towards the end of the twelfth century.[76] Theodoricus Monachus may have directly inspired the Icelandic view of the barbarian Other in his descriptions of raiding in Britain, and in the account of King Magnús being surrounded by a large host in Ireland and killed there.[77] Again, however, it is in what these texts say of Iceland that the most promising material for understanding the Icelandic attitude to the Other can be found. They emphasize the binary opposition of Iceland to Norway, which, as the introductory section on Other Theory will argue, had an effect on the way Icelanders viewed the world, including both 'civilized' and 'barbarian' peoples. *Historia Norwegie* does this by asserting that Iceland was settled first by two Norwegian murderers, Yngvar and Hjorleiv, who were fleeing justice in their homeland.[78] The Icelandic response to this could be seen to be the comment at the end of the *Melabók* AM 106 manuscript of *Landnámabók* which states that the work was

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[73] Cf. DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', pp. 259–60; Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 169; on environmental influence on perceptions of people see Bartlett, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', pp. 45–7 and Cole, 'Racial Thinking', pp. 28–9. See also discussion in the Other Theory section of this introduction.

[74] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* II.iii.2–vii (ed. Friis-Jensen, pp. 150–6); cf. Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes* I, 2.43–5 (ed. H. E. Davidson, pp. 47–9).

[75] Christiansen, E., 'Saxo Grammaticus', p. 567; Davidson, ed., *Saxo Grammaticus: The History of the Danes* II, pp. 1–7; Friis–Jensen, ed., *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum* I, pp. xlvi–xlviii.

[76] *Historie Norwegie*, ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, p. 15; Theodoricus Monachus, *Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, trans. McDougall and McDougall, p. xii.

[77] Theodoricus Monachus, *Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, chs. 31–2 (trans. McDougall and McDougall, pp. 50–1).

[78] *Historia Norwegie*, ch. 8 (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, pp. 68–71).

written to answer foreign men who say that 'vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmennum'.[79] A more general response can be understood in the way in which some of the *Íslendingasögur* emphasize the alterity and criminality of foreigners in contrast to the instinctively Christian-like Icelanders who populate those same sagas.

Theodoricus Monachus, who also makes numerous references to classical learning, does not question the noble origins of the Icelanders, instead recognizing both their nobility and their expertise in historical matters and dating, particularly the history of the Norwegian kings.[80] When considering religion, however, Iceland is cast as oppositional to Norway and its proselytizing king Óláfr Tryggvason. The 'innate obduracy and savage natures of the inhabitants' make the initial conversion efforts difficult, and when it comes to the general conversion at the Alþing, Theodoricus describes a host of heathens running to arms to kill the missionaries and their small number of converts, and only being prevented from doing so by divine intervention — a version which differs greatly from the Icelandic accounts in *Njáls saga* and *Íslendingabók*.[81]

When it comes to tracing classical ideas in the *Íslendingasögur* it is essential to consider that some ideas with a classical heritage may have entered Icelandic thought via near-contemporary medieval texts such as those discussed above. These texts reflect a learned northern European perspective on the world which Icelandic authors undoubtedly identified with, but which had a tendency to make Iceland itself Other. Icelanders would certainly have come into contact with this learning and these views when they traveled abroad, but they will also have encountered some at least of these texts in Iceland. One would therefore expect to find both echoes of and responses to these ideas in Icelandic writings from the thirteenth century, including the *Íslendingasögur*, and there are few

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[79] 'We are descended from slaves and villains', *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, footnote on p. 336). The Melabók manuscript was written in the seventeenth century, but is thought to be based on earlier medieval manuscripts. To what extent the sentiment expressed here reflects the concerns of the medieval period or the seventeenth century (or both) it is not possible to say with certainty, *Landnámabók: Melabók AM 106. 112 Fol.* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. I–II, 143); *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, vols. 1–2 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. LXXXIII–CIII, 336); the *Historia Norwegie* is itself thought to have used Adam of Bremen as a model, and perhaps to have been written in part to counter Adam's view of the foundation of a Scandinavian archdiocese, Würth, 'Historiography and History', p. 159; Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, p. 175.

[80] White, *Non-Native Sources*, p. 41; Theodoricus Monachus, *Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, Prologue and chs. 1–3 (trans. McDougall and McDougall, pp. 1–6); Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 169–70.

[81] Theodoricus Monachus, *Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, ch. 12 (trans. McDougall and McDougall, pp. 15–6); *Íslendingabók*, ch. 7 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 14–8); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 100–5 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 255–72).

subjects (perhaps only Christianity and royalty) in the sagas more likely to be influenced by these foreign ideas than the subject of foreigners and barbarians.

Barbarians

Skotar

There are fourteen instances of characters with agency in the *Íslendingasögur* being described as *skozkr*, or as coming from or living in *Skotland*. Those with names are Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða*, Grjótgarðr and Snækólfr in *Njáls saga*, Melsnati *jarl* and Hundi *jarl* also in *Njáls saga*, Melkólfr *jarl* in *Njáls saga*, Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Óláfr *Skotakonungr* in *Egils saga*, Víga-Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga* and the freed slaves Hundi and Erpr the son of Meldún *jarl* in *Laxdæla saga*.[82] Unnamed characters who are described in these terms include the inhabitants of a small stone fort who attack Þorkell in *Vatnsdæla saga*, the betrayers of Þorsteinn *rauði* in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Laxdæla saga*, the enslavers of Þorvaldr in *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, the killers of the thief Veglágr in *Fóstbræðra saga* and, arguably, the *blótrisi* in *Kormáks saga* who kills Kormákr.[83] In addition to these fourteen examples, there are the passive victims of raiding in *Skotland* by Sigurðr *jarl* Hlǫðvisson that is described in *Njáls saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, where there is no specific mention of the people being raided, and also in *Þorsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, where there is, as well as raiding by King Eiríkr in *Egils saga* and various vikings in *Grettis saga*.[84] With the exceptions of Haki and Hekja, Nagli, Hrappr and the freed slaves in *Laxdæla saga*, all of these characters feature in

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[82] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 83–4, 86, 158 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 201–5, 206–8 and 461); *Eyrbyggja saga*, chs. 18–9 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 33–46); *Egils saga*, chs. 51–4 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 129–41); *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 6, 10, 17–18, 24 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 10, 19, 39–43 and 68–9).

[83] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 43 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 114–5); *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 195–6); *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 4 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 6–8); *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, ch. 15 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 41); *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 13 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 184–91); 'heathen giant', *Kormáks saga*, ch. 27 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 299); for discussion of *blótrisi* see footnote 2 in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson), p. 299.

[84] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 89 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 223–4); *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 12 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 99); *Þorsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, ch. 1 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 299–300); *Egils saga*, ch. 59 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 176); *Grettis saga*, chs. 1, 3–4 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 4 and 8–10).

episodes that are set geographically in a place referred to as *Skotland* (though Veglágr is primarily active in Iceland).

This is not a large number of references in such an extensive body of writing, but it does represent a significant minority of all the foreign characters and the episodes set outside Iceland and Norway in the *Íslendingasögur*. Furthermore the wide spread of these references across eleven different sagas indicates that the concepts of *skozkr* and *Skotland* were well-known in medieval Iceland. These words are usually translated as 'Scottish' and 'Scotland', but these terms are anachronistic and encourage confusion with the political and geographical entity which we think of as Scotland today.[85]

It is clear from geographical details in the sections set in *Skotland* that the term is used by the authors of the sagas to refer to part of the mainland of northern Britain. The invasions and raiding of *Skotland* described are almost all seaborne expeditions that originate in Orkney, and in addition *Kormáks saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Egils saga* link *Skotland* geographically with *England*. In *Eyrbyggja saga* Nagli arrives in Iceland on the ship of his friend Álfgeirr, a Hebridean. From these indications it is evident that these references to *Skotland* were included with a clear idea of where *Skotland* was located, that is, in a region of northern Britain broadly corresponding to what the population of the area called *Alba* or in Latin *Scotia* during the tenth century. This region would ultimately form the central part of what by the thirteenth century had become known widely as Scotland.[86] References to *Skotland* in the sagas do not, however, include Shetland, Orkney, or the Hebrides, as these are frequently referred to in their own right in the same texts.

The southern extent of what the saga authors thought of as *Skotland* is harder to assess, and the only indication of any kind comes from the end of *Njáls saga*, when Kári and his companions pull their ship ashore at *Beruvikr* (probably either Berwick-upon-Tweed or North Berwick) and travel overland to *Hvítsborg* (possibly Whitby, though this would make little sense unless travel by sea was completely impossible), where they

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[85] See discussion in Broun, 'Origin of Scottish Identity', pp. 35–8.

[86] Broun, 'Origin of Scottish Identity', pp. 35–45, argues that the identifiers *Scotia* and *Scoti* (place and people respectively) predate the thirteenth century with effectively the same meaning. He argues that even though the geographical limits varied, 'Scotland' and 'Scots' can therefore be used at least for the eleventh century. In the sense in which they are direct translations of the Gaelic *Alba* and *fir Alban* or *Albanaig*, 'Scotland' and 'Scots' can arguably even be used for the late ninth and tenth centuries (pp. 39–40), though to avoid misunderstandings I will use the Norse terms given in the sagas in this thesis, which carry fewer geographical assumptions than the English equivalents.

spend the winter with Melkólfr *jarl*.[87] The geography of this section is so confused anyway (particularly the idea that either *Beruvikr* is a natural stopping point north of Wales) that it is impossible to use as evidence to establish a clearer idea of the extent of *Skotland*. It is not surprising if the saga writers were unsure about the precise boundaries of *Skotland*. Royal writs and chronicles indicate that *Scotia* was for a large part of the medieval period used to describe a people, rather than a geographical area, and that from the mid twelfth century when this changed, until at least the early thirteenth century, it referred only to the mainland north of the Firth of Forth.[88]

During the tenth and eleventh centuries the kingdom that had arisen from the merging of the leaders of Dál Riata in the northwest and the Pictish kingdom of north-eastern Britain in the late ninth century was known in the Irish annals as *Alba*, and in Latin as *Albania* or *Scotia*.[89] This, presumably, was the political identity which visiting Scandinavians would have been presented with in the tenth century, though if their knowledge of northern Britain was influenced by information from the southern part of the island then an indiscriminate use of *skozkr* and *Skotland* becomes more understandable.

During the tenth century variations of these terms were being used in England, so it is probable that when Scandinavians communicated with the people there they may have heard the word *Scotta* used in a northern British (rather than an Irish) context. By the early tenth century the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was already using *Scotta cyning* to refer to a king who can probably be identified with Constantín of *Alba*, a term which in Bede's time and up until about 900 had been used of the people of Ireland (including those who settled in Dál Riata).[90] Writing around or just before the middle of the twelfth century, Geoffrey of Monmouth refers to *Albania*, but notes on two occasions that this is the land 'quae lingua nostra his temporibus appellatur Scotia'.[91] He refers frequently to the *Scotiae*, describing them as the result of mixing between Picts and the Irish.[92] As has

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[87] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 158 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 461); cf. footnote 4, p. 461.
[88] Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots*, pp. 4–5; Broun, 'Seven Kingdoms', pp. 38–9.
[89] Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots*, p. 3; McDonald, *Kingdom of the Isles*, p. 23; Bruford, 'What Happened to the Caledonians?', pp. 65–8; Broun, 'Seven Kingdoms', pp. 38–9; Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 320–2 and 351; Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 210–11.
[90] Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 328; Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots*, p. 3; Woolf, 'Reporting Scotland', pp. 226–9; *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 970.
[91] 'Which in our tongue is now called *Scotia*', Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De gestis Britonum* 23, 156 (ed. M. D. Reeve, pp. 31 and 211).
[92] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De gestis Britonum* 70 (ed. M. D. Reeve, p. 87).

been discussed, Geoffrey's work was known in Iceland by the end of the twelfth century, and may have influenced the understanding the saga authors had of Britain.

It is thus conceivable that Scandinavian visitors to Britain had learnt the words *skozkr* and *Skotland* from contact with the English as early as the tenth century.[93] However, there is a strong possibility that the use of these words is anachronistic, derived from contemporary (thirteenth-century) contact with *Skotland* via Orkney and applied either for convenience or through ignorance to the tenth century. This theory is supported by the description in *Eiríks saga rauða* of Þorsteinn conquering *Katanes ok Suðrland, Ross ok Meræfi ok meir en hálft Skotland*.[94] This is likely to be anachronistic, for apart from the problem with the use of *Skotland*, Caithness and Sutherland did not exist as separate provinces until the twelfth century, which by association calls into question the legitimacy of the use of *Skotland* in the *Íslendingasögur* in reference to the tenth century.[95]

From a literary perspective, most of the incidents involving *Skotland* or people described as *skozkr* can be classified into three categories: battles against *skozkr* jarls or kings, raiding in *Skotland*, and *skozkr* individuals in a Norse context. There are four battles, including two in *Njáls saga* against Snækólfr and Grjótgarðr, and against Hundi *jarl* and Melsnati *jarl*, against Óláfr *Skotakonungr* at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga*, and Þorsteinn's conquest of and then betrayal in northern *Skotland*. There are eight incidents of raiding: Þorkell in *Vatnsdæla saga*, Þorsteinn's conquests (which in *Laxdæla saga* is described as *hernað ok herjaði* rather than *unnu* as in *Eiríks saga rauða*, though the result is rule over *hálft Skotland* in both), Kormákr raiding in *Skotland* when he fights the giant and dies, Eiríkr raiding there on his way to *England* in *Egils saga*, raiding by Ǫnundr, Ófeigr and Þormóðr *skapti* and the vikings Vígbjóðr and Vestmarr in *Grettis saga* and finally the three occasions when Sigurðr Hlǫðvisson's raids in *Skotland* are

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[93] Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, p. 282; Woolf, 'Reporting Scotland', pp. 233–4, argues that *Skotlandsfjörðr*, used several times in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla* and apparently referring to a stretch of water between some of the Inner Hebrides and the mainland, is likely to date to the ninth century, having a similar origin to the use of *Péttlandsfjörðr* for the Pentland Firth. He argues further that because *Péttland* is 'unambiguously' borrowed into Old Norse from Old English, so might *Skotland* have been, originally referring to Argyll. The implication is that in some part of England that was in regular contact with the Norse in the ninth century, such as Northumbria, *Scotland* was already in use at that time, and was the origin of the Norse use. The geographical use of the term in Old Norse must have changed with time just as it did in Old English.

[94] 'Caithness and Sutherland, Ross and Moray, and more than half of *Skotland*', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 196).

[95] Crawford, 'Earldom Strategies', pp. 105-24; Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, p. 283.

described.[96] There are only four places in the *Íslendingasögur* where people described as *skozkr* take active roles in a Norse context: Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða*, Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Vígr-Hrappr and the freed slaves who settle near Unnr in *Laxdæla saga*. The three exceptions which fit none of these patterns are Kári staying a winter with Melkólfr *jarl* in *Njáls saga*, Þorvaldr being enslaved in *Skotland* in *Hœnsa-Þóris saga*, and Veglágr being killed there in *Fóstbræðra saga*, though it is conceivable that Veglágr, who is identified only by his nickname 'wall-layer', is meant to be *skozkr* by origin, since it is to *Skotland* that he travels when he has to leave Iceland (though this could equally be mere coincidence). If this were the case it would place Veglágr too into the third category of *skozkr* individuals in a Norse context.

Each of the three main types of interaction between Norse and *Skotar* follow broad patterns which have distinctive traits in common. In the battles the *skozkr* armies always have superior numbers and often use military tactics that give them an advantage. In *Njáls saga* the *Skotar* use the tactic of diverting some men to make a surprise attack on the rear of the Norse army. In a narrative sense this allows a battle between the Norsemen and their *skozkr* opposition to be framed as a close struggle. This dramatic tension and the narrowness of the margins of victory in turn invite the Icelandic heroes to distinguish themselves, and establish the martial credentials of Kári Sǫlmundarson. The same is true of the overwhelming odds which Helgi and Grímr refuse to surrender to when their single ship is attacked by the thirteen ships of Grjótgarðr and Snækólfr, though ultimately they need help from Kári to defeat these *skozkir víkingar*.

In *Egils saga* the force of *Bretar* and *Skotar* at the battle of Vínheiðr flees from the attack of Egill and Þórólfr's smaller band of men and hides in thick woodland. At an advantageous moment they suddenly reappear out of the woods, catch Þórólfr unawares and slay him, before they in turn are defeated by Egill. There are no details about Þorsteinn's battles in *Skotland*, but in the account in *Eiríks saga rauða* he is betrayed and then killed in battle, whereas *Laxdæla saga* just says that he was betrayed by the *Skotar* and killed at Caithness.[97] There are no battles between even numbers of soldiers who fight face to face without the aid of treachery or ambushes. This may be purely for the literary purpose of enhancing the stature of the Norse characters involved, or it may

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[96] 'Raiding and plundering', *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 4 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 7); 'conquered', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 195–6).
[97] Cf. *Landnámabók*, ch. S 95/ H 82 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 136); *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 5 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 8–9).

reflect a medieval Icelandic stereotype about the way the *Skotar* waged war. These examples of the barbarian in battle will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

Apart from the miniature battle between Þorkell and six natives of *Skotland* in *Vatnsdœla saga* (which again features the *Skotar* attacking with overwhelming odds and being held off), the episodes of raiding in *Skotland* described in the *Íslendingasögur* that mention the victims of these attacks at all merely note that they fled away. In *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* they take advantage of the wooded terrain to escape, and in *Kormáks saga*, though most of the natives flee, the enigmatic *blótrisi* attacks Kormákr out of the woods like the *skozkr* army in *Egils saga*. Most of the accounts of raiding, however, refer to *Skotland* in an entirely passive sense as a place where raiding happens. The raiding of Þorkell, Helgi and Grímr, and Gunnlaugr in *Skotland* all take place at a time when these characters have had their ability and honour called into question by events in other countries; by successfully raiding *Skotland* their honour is restored. The theme of the fleeing barbarian will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Within a Norse context *skozkr* characters are treated in more detail, with their appearance, abilities, and character somewhat fleshed out. Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða* are presented as barbaric compared to the Icelandic characters; they dress in simple and outlandish garb, and are likened to animals through the description *dýrum skjótari*.[98] Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga* is introduced as the *þjonustu madr* of a Hebridean visitor to Iceland.[99] In the medieval manuscripts of *Eyrbyggja saga* he is described as *fothvatur* and *skozkr at kyni*, and a later paper manuscript adds that he is a *mikill maðr*.[100] He is boastful and acts like a warrior, but when presented with danger abandons his pretence and runs in terror until he drops from exhaustion. As a result he becomes a figure of fun for the Icelanders, who compose mocking verses about Nagli's contribution to the fight.[101] Veglágr, who may or may not be *skozkr*, is even less trustworthy than Nagli, and like him has his true character exposed to the household in Iceland after a large amount of stolen property is found in his possession.[102] In chapter 59 of *Egils saga* the author comments that 'Aðalsteinn konungr hafði skattgilt undir sik Skotland eptir fall

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[98] 'Faster than deer', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).
[99] 'Man-servant', *Eyrbyggja saga* (ed. F. S. Scott, 2003), pp. 44–5.
[100] 'Fleet of foot'; 'of *skozkr* descent'; 'large man', *Eyrbyggja saga* (ed. F. S. Scott, 2003), pp. 44–6.
[101] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 19 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 45–6).
[102] *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 13 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 184–91).

Óláfs konungs, en þó var þat fólk jafnan ótrútt honum'.[103] On the other hand Erpr, the son of the *skozkr* Meldún *jarl* (and grandson of an *írskr* king), is described as too well-born to remain a thrall, demonstrating that social status could be more significant for a character than place of origin, and the *skozkr* slave Hundi is one of the followers Unnr rewards for their 'starf […] ok góðvilja'.[104] Víga-Hrappr is another outlier from this general pattern due to his relatively high social status but also social disruptiveness (during and after his life), though he is *skozkr* only by descent on his father's side, and owes perhaps more of his characterization to his Hebridean upbringing and ancestry.[105] Haki and Hekja will be discussed in Chapters One and Two on diet and material culture, and again alongside Nagli and Veglágr in Chapter Four on character.

Írar

At a conservative reckoning there are thirty-two occasions in the main body of *Íslendingasögur* when the place *Írland* or the people called *Írar* are referred to, as well as further mentions in the *þættir* which are often associated with the sagas. These references are across sixteen different sagas and a broad range of themes, with a portrayal more diverse than that of *Skotland* and *skozkr* characters. The most common context is a mention in passing of the royal *írskr* ancestry or familial connection of an Icelandic character, of which there are nine in total. These nine, however, all refer to the same two Icelandic lineages and the same two *írskr* kings: Kjarvalr *konungr* and Helgi *magri* and his descendants, and Mýrkjartan *konungr* and the family of Óláfr Hǫskuldsson.[106] As well as being a major theme of the Óláfr section of *Laxdæla saga* there are also four passing mentions of family connections to these two *írskr* kings in the

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[103] 'Aðalsteinn *konungr* had made *Skotland* a tributary kingdom of his following the fall of Óláfr *konungr*, though that people was consistently untrue to him', *Egils saga*, ch. 59 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 176).
[104] 'Labour […] and good will', *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 6 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 10); on Erpr's background see *Landnámabók*, ch. S 96/ H 83 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 138).
[105] Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 143–5.
[106] Hermann Pálsson suggests that Helgi's nickname *magri* ('lean') may have originally been the Irish name Magor, perhaps adopted at baptism, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 94–5; see also pp. 119–27 in the same work on the descendants of Kjarvalr, and pp. 132–8 on the *írskr* mother of Óláfr Hǫskuldsson, Melkorka, who Hermann Pálsson concludes was probably not in reality the daughter of Mýrkjartan.

saga, as well as single references in *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga*.[107]

There are four references to friendly interactions between Icelanders and *írskr* royalty or *jarlar*, the lengthiest being Óláfr Hǫskuldsson's stay with his grandfather Mýrkjartan *konungr* in *Laxdæla saga*.[108] Another Icelandic visitor to a noble *írskr* household is Þorgils when he spends a winter with Hugi *jarl* in *Írland* in *Flóamanna saga* after relations sour with his original *írskr* host, an ordinary farmer.[109] Also in this category, due to the implications of past dealings with *írskr* royalty, are the two occasions on which Óláfr gives away gifts he had originally received from Mýrkjartan in Ireland, a sword to Egill Skallagrimsson in *Laxdæla saga* and a cloak and dog to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi in *Njáls saga*.[110]

There are five descriptions of accidental visits to *Írland*, all of which carry the threat of loss of property, imprisonment or death for the Icelanders concerned, as in fact do both Óláfr's initial landing in *Írland* in *Laxdæla saga* and also a dangerous moment during Þorgils' second visit in *Flóamanna saga* before Hugi *jarl* arrives.[111] On these occasions the hostile reception is replaced with a welcoming one, but the *Írar* live up to their threatening mien when Þórhallr is driven ashore in *Eiríks saga rauða* and enslaved, and when Eindriði Hallsteinson suffers the same fate in *Droplaugarsona saga*. Visits with happier endings, though only due to good luck, are those of Þórgeirr in *Fóstbræðra saga*,

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[107] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 1, 23, 26, 28, 65 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 3, 63–4, 72, 75 and 193–4); *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, p. 4); *Grettis saga*, ch. 3 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 8–9); *Egils saga*, ch. 78 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 242); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 113 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 285–6); there is also a lineage given for Karlsefni in the *Hauksbók* AM 544 4to version of *Eiríks saga rauða* which links him to a daughter of Kjarvalr named 'Friðgerðr' (Þorgerðr in other texts), but this seems to be an interpolation by the manuscript author Haukr, borrowed from *Landnámabók* (also included in *Hauksbók*) to assert his own royal ancestry (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, pp. 217–8 and footnotes; *Landnámabók*, ch. S 207/H 175 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 239–41).

[108] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 20–1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 49–59).

[109] *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 309–10).

[110] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 23 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 65–6); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 70 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 173–4).

[111] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 20–1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 49–59); *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 309–10).

Sigurðr *jarl* Hlöðvisson's shipwrecked tax collectors in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and Guðleifr later on in the same saga.[112]

In these five encounters Norsemen are portrayed as the victims of *írskr* violence, but in seven other encounters Norsemen are involved in raiding and invading *Írland*. Three depictions of this kind of interaction relate to *Brjánsbardaga* (the Battle of Clontarf), with a lengthy description in *Njáls saga*, a shorter description in *Þórsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, and a mention of a death there in *Ljósvetninga saga*.[113] *Kormáks saga* and *Svarfdæla saga* describe full-scale invasions of *Írland*, while *Grettis saga* and *Flóamanna saga* both feature raiding there by smaller bands of men.[114]

Only four times do *írskr* characters appear in Iceland: three times as slaves in *Egils saga*, *Njáls saga* and famously the story of Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, and once as settlers in *Kjalnesinga saga*.[115] Other references to *Írland* which fit none of these categories are the use of an *írskr* incantation by a magician in Iceland, a reference to *Írland it mikla* in one of the manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða*, and finally to settlers leaving Norway for 'Dyflinnar skíði'.[116] There are other references to Dublin, notably as a trading place, but as Dublin was originally a Norse settlement these do not necessarily imply any direct contact with the *Írar* or reflect any attitudes towards them.[117] Although there is good archaeological evidence for Norse settlement in other places around the island, Norwegians moving to 'Dyflinnar skíði' is one of only two suggestions that

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[112] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 9 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, p. 226); *Droplaugarsona saga*, chs. 4, 8 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 145 and 155); *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 158–9); *Eyrbyggja saga*, chs. 29, 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, pp. 76–7 and 176–80).

[113] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 154–7 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 439–53); *Þórsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, ch. 2 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 301–2); *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 12 (22) (ed. Björn Sigfússon, p. 61); cf. McGettigan, *Battle of Clontarf*, pp. 87–109.

[114] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 267–70); *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 28 (*Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 205–6); *Grettis saga*, chs. 1, 5 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 3–4 and 13–14); *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 262–3).

[115] *Egils saga*, ch. 77 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 240–2); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 47–51 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 120–33); *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 12 et seq. (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 22ff.); *Kjalnesinga saga*, chs. 1–2 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 3–9).

[116] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 127–8); *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, p. 234); 'the shire of Dublin', *Egils saga*, ch. 4 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 12).

[117] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 12–13 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 22–8); *Egils saga*, ch. 32 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 84); Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', pp. 497–9.

Norsemen sometimes settled in *Írland*, the other being the mysterious Icelandic chieftain there who saves Guðleifr in *Eyrbyggja saga*.[118]

Írland and the *Írar* are invariably translated as 'Ireland' and the 'Irish', and indeed it is perfectly clear from the geographical references to *Írland*, as well as the etymology of the word itself, that it is the same island which is called 'Ireland' in English and 'Éire' in Irish. The etymology of the word is interesting, as the English word 'Irish' seems to have been originally borrowed from Old Norse *írskr*, rather than directly from the Irish language, as one might expect.[119] If true, this would speak volumes about the nature of the relationships between the Irish, English and Scandinavians in the early medieval period. It is also interesting in this context to remember that the Old Norse word *Skotar* may well have been borrowed from Old English *Scottas*, where it was used until about 900 to refer to the inhabitants of Ireland, and then for the inhabitants of Scotland, unless this is a direct later medieval borrowing from Scotland itself.[120] It is therefore conceivable that the Vikings might have learned their word for the Scottish from the English but have taught the English the originally Irish word 'Irish' at around the same time. This would suggest that channels of communication in medieval Britain and Ireland were not as straightforward as the geography might suggest, and, as an aside, that the Scandinavian presence in the Irish Sea at the time may have been a significant barrier to contact between the English and the Irish.[121]

So far as the geography is concerned deliberate journeys to *Írland* usually involve stopping in Orkney and the Hebrides en route, or sometimes traveling from *England*, so it is clear that in geographical terms *Írland* is the island of Ireland. Icelanders also evidently traveled directly to Ireland from Iceland, to judge from the statement in *Landnámabók* that 'frá Reykjanesi á sunnanverðu Íslandi er fimm dœgra haf til

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[118] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, pp. 176–80); Kelly, 'Vikings in Connemara', pp. 174–87; Sheehan 'Reassessment of the Viking burial', pp. 60–75.

[119] *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 544.

[120] See discussion in introductory section to this thesis on the *Skotar.*

[121] Wallace calls the Irish Sea 'a veritable 'viking lake' from the ninth to the eleventh centuries', 'Archaeology of Ireland's viking-age towns', p. 839; a brief survey of *A New History of Ireland I* (ed. Ó Cróinín) provides no evidence of direct contact between English and Irish during the tenth century, and though their proximity makes this seem unlikely at first glance, it is not implausible. Military contact can be ruled out, and trade from England would likely have been directed towards the Norse settlements along the eastern coast of Ireland, so although a complete lack of contact is inconceivable, especially among the political and ecclesiastical elite, what there was may well have come through a Norse filter and/or been subject to disruption as a result of viking activity; cf. Bhreathnach, 'Ireland, c.900–c.1000', pp. 268–84, especially 277–9 on the vikings; O'Sullivan, McCormick, Kerr and Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland,* pp. 269–81.

Jǫlduhlaups á Írlandi í suðr'.[122] Accidental landings are the result of storms which have driven boats out to sea, beyond sight of land sometimes for days or weeks, and Ireland is of course a natural first landing for a boat attempting to return eastwards to Europe from the open Atlantic. However, twenty-first-century political and indeed social and cultural ideas of what exactly Ireland is, or what it means to be Irish, after various influxes of people from abroad, colonization, mass emigration and the partition of the island into two countries, are far from agreed. Even if they could be, they would still be greatly removed from what the medieval Icelanders conceived of as *Írland*, having indeed little more than geography in common. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, I will use the Old Icelandic terms and understand them to refer to the Ireland and Irish that thirteenth-century Icelanders had in their minds when they attempted to remember or imagine the Viking Age, an image guided by contemporary contacts, oral traditions and literary influences.

The frequency of the references to *Írland* and the *Írar* within the main body of *Íslendingasögur*, approximately twice as many as there are for either *Skotland* or *England*, makes it the third most referenced place in the sagas after Iceland and Norway. This supports the notion that there was extensive contact between Ireland and Iceland at some point during the medieval period. The domination of Iceland by Norway in the later medieval period makes the Viking Age the most likely time for this contact, which is supported by the evidence of *Landnámabók* for Irish settlers in Iceland and also by DNA analyses of the current Icelandic population.[123] This in turn suggests that references to *Írland* in the *Íslendingasögur* were based on a knowledge of and interest in *Írland* that dated back to the tenth century or even earlier. Of course, *Írland* like *Skotland* serves a literary purpose in the sagas, and quite possibly a political purpose as

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[122] 'From Reykjanes in southern Iceland it is five days' ocean to Slyne Head in Ireland in the south' (three days in Hauksbók); Jǫlduhlaup has been identified with Slyne Head on the Connemara coast (Ceann Léime in Irish) on etymological grounds, the original Irish name Léim Lára having the same meaning, 'Mare's Leap', as the Icelandic, *Landnámabók*, ch. 2 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 32–4 and footnote); cf. Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 222–3.

[123] *Landnámabók*, chs. S 208 (H 175), 217, footnote to 348 (H 307), 366 (H 321) and 392 (H 348) and Formáli §16 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 240–1, 248, 352, 367, 392–3 and CXXXI–II); a thorough summary of settlers in *Landnámabók* with links to Ireland can be found in Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 47–102; Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Ireland and the Irish', pp. 262–9; Orri Vésteinsson, 'Ethnicity and class', pp. 505–6; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 183. There is of course extensive evidence of every kind, in addition to that of Icelandic literature, for Viking activity in Ireland, some of which would certainly have involved Icelandic individuals or small groups; cf. Doherty, 'Vikings in Ireland', pp. 288–330; Ó Floinn, 'Archaeology of the Early Viking Age', pp. 131–165; Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Friend and Foe', pp. 381–402.

well, but, unlike with *Skotland*, the diversity of the references shows that the idea of *Írland* and the *Írar* was less fixed in the minds of the medieval Icelanders, suggesting that a stronger historical memory of what *Írland* was actually like had survived.[124] *Írland* was not distant enough in people's minds for it to lapse into the crude stereotypes that characterize the portrayal of *Skotland*.

Stereotypes there undoubtedly and inevitably were, however, even if not as consistent as those for *Skotland*.[125] On the one hand royal *írskr* ancestry seems to be portrayed as a consistently good thing, which earns Melkorka her freedom and Óláfr a distinguished marriage and a share in the inheritance from his father.[126] Their appearance and characters also testify to the high qualities associated with royal *írskr* blood, as does the behaviour of Mýrkjartan *konungr* himself, who behaves just like the best Norwegian kings in this and other sagas. In *Njáls saga*, Guðmundr *ríki*, from whom 'komit allt it mesta mannval á Íslandi' is also descended through Helgi *magri* from an *írskr* king, as is his wife.[127] In the same saga Brján *konungr* is portrayed as a saint whose Christian virtues while living are exceptional, and whose blood after death performs a miracle.[128] Interestingly, when the main antagonist in the latter part of the saga, Flosi of Svinafell, is introduced, his royal *írskr* ancestry through Helgi *magri* is not specifically mentioned, as if it does not fit with the author's ambiguous or even negative attitude towards Flosi.[129]

The free *írskr* settlers in *Kjalnesinga saga* are mainly portrayed positively, and as equals to the Icelanders already living there, though dependent initially on the chieftain Helgi *bjóla*'s generosity to get land; one of them, Andríðr, becomes sworn brothers with Helgi's sons and marries an Icelandic woman who is 'fríð sýnum ok auðig at fé'.[130] However, there is some ambiguity about another of the *írskr* settlers, Esja, who, despite being a Christian, practices magic, which almost always has negative associations in the

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[124] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 495.
[125] Aalto, *Categorizing Otherness*, p. 18.
[126] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 13, 23, 26 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 27–8, 63–4 and 72).
[127] 'Are descended all the most select people in Iceland', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 113 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 285–6).
[128] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 154, 157 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 440–2 and 452–3).
[129] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 97 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 237–8); Norman, 'Treatment of Irish Ancestry', pp. 102–7.
[130] 'Beautiful in appearance and wealthy in possessions', *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 2 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 5–6).

sagas; an *írskr* incantation is also used to perform magic by an Icelandic magician in *Vatnsdæla saga*.[131]

Írskr slaves in Iceland are portrayed very negatively, worse than either *Írar* in other contexts or slaves of other backgrounds, as if the combination is particularly bad. The slave Melkólfr in *Njáls saga* is described as *óvinsæll*, and is characterized as lazy and untrustworthy; his actions play an important part in the events leading towards Gunnarr's downfall.[132] In *Egils saga* a group of *írskr* slaves run away and burn a house down with a family inside, before they are eventually caught and killed, in a story which echoes the *Landnámabók* account of Ingólfr Arnarson and his foster-brother Hjǫrleifr arriving in Iceland.[133] The *írskr* slaves in that story murder Hjǫrleifr and his men, abduct their womenfolk, and flee to what becomes known as the Vestmannaeyjar after Ingólfr tracks them down there and kills them all.[134] In the short story *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar* an *írskr* slave called Gilli murders his master Þorsteinn and then threatens to curse Þorsteinn's wife and descendants if she will not stop torturing him, another negative reference to magic use. Gilli, although a slave, is according to the *þáttr* himself descended from Kjarvalr *konungr*, so it may be that *írskr* royal ancestry counts for more in a good Icelandic family than in a slave; it does however confuse the stereotype built up in the other sagas.[135] The personal characteristics of the *Írar* will feature in Chapter Four of this dissertation, particularly the difference between the characters of *írskr* kings and noblemen compared to *írskr* slaves.

The dangerous side of the *Írar* suggested by these murderous slaves recurs fairly consistently in accounts both of invasions and raiding in *Írland* and in accounts of accidental journeys there. In all five of the episodes in which Norsemen are ship-wrecked or make an unplanned landing in *Írland* they face the threat of capture and possibly death at the hands of the *Írar*, who typically arrive quickly in a large band of

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[131] *Kjalnesinga saga*, chs. 2–5 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 5–16); *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 127–8); Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 141–2.

[132] 'Unpopular', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 121).

[133] Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 217–9.

[134] 'Westmen-Islands', *Egils saga*, ch. *77* (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 240–2); *Landnámabók*, chs. SH 6–8 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 41–5).

[135] *Draumur Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar* (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 323–6); slaves called Svartr, which may be a translation of Irish *Dub*, feature in *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar* and *Hávarðr saga Ísfirðings*, but they are not specifically identified as being *írskr*, so one cannot assume that thirteenth-century Icelanders would have associated the name with the *Írar*, even if it was originally (Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, p. 219).

well-armed local inhabitants with spears.[136] On three occasions the Norsemen are rescued or escape, but on two occasions they are captured and die as slaves there. Óláfr Hǫskuldsson is at risk of facing the same fate until his grandfather Mýrkjartan *konungr* arrives and accepts him as family.[137] Similarly, when Þorgils and Þorsteinn raid in *Írland* in *Flóamanna saga*, although they are successful initially they are forced to beat a hasty retreat when a large force of *Írar* arrives on the scene, and later in the saga, while wintering in *Írland*, they are again threatened by 'lið mikit [sem] fara með skjöldum, eigi færa en hundrað manns'.[138]

In pitched battles the honours are more even, but still the *Írar* seem more dangerous than, for example, the *Skotar*, despite fighting without the use of the deceptive tactics that characterize *skozkr* armies. In *Kormáks saga* Haraldr *konungr gráfeldr* wages a successful campaign in *Írland*, though they are on one occasion opposed on landing by 'mikit lið', but while Skíði is ultimately victorious in his invasion in *Svarfdæla saga*, he is on the point of fleeing when Karl arrives to help him; it still takes all day to defeat the *Írar*.[139] In *Grettis saga* Ǫnundr fights and wins a heavy battle with five ships against five when he encounters the *írskr* Kjarvalr *konungr* off Barra and 'fell mart af hvárumtveggjum', and in the most famous battle of all, Clontarf, the *Írar* are victorious over the Norsemen, despite the death of Brján *konungr*.[140] These encounters will be returned to in more detail when battles with barbarians are discussed in Chapter Three.

A recurring theme in many of the interactions between Icelanders and *Írar* is the problem of the language barrier; relations are always improved for both sides when communication is possible.[141] This is true of the relationship between Hǫskuldr and Melkorka, and Melkorka's fortunes in Iceland improve greatly after she admits that she can speak and they are able to converse in Icelandic. Likewise, their son Óláfr is able to make a success of his trip to *Írland* only because he is able to speak *írska* and therefore negotiate and communicate with the *Írar* they first encounter as well as with Mýrkjartan

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[136] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 497; see discussion of the influence of Irish spear use on Hiberno-Norse weaponry in Halpin, 'Weapons and warfare', p. 128.
[137] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 20–1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 49–59).
[138] 'A great host moving with shields, no fewer than one hundred men', *Flóamanna saga*, chs. 16, 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 262–3 and 309–10).
[139] 'A great host', *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 267–70); *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 28 (*Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 205–6).
[140] 'Many fell on either side', *Grettis saga*, ch. 1 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 3–4).
[141] Cf. Downham, 'Vikings' Settlements', p. 3; on language in meetings with the Other see also Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 183–4.

konungr, who specifically compliments Óláfr on his excellent knowledge of *írska*, taking it as proof that they are related.[142] In *Flóamanna saga* a stand-off between the departing raiders and an *írskr* force led by Hugi *jarl* is resolved when a female hostage reveals that she is half Norwegian and can speak Norse, and offers to negotiate between the groups.[143] She and her daughter are freed as a result, and Þorgils takes away monetary compensation instead; later in the saga their cooperation pays off when Hugi *jarl* arrives with an army to attack Þorgils but welcomes him instead when he recognizes him.[144] In the accounts of the Battle of Clontarf in both *Njáls saga* and *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar*, Þorsteinn has his life spared following a brief exchange with one of his *írskr* enemies, and in *Eyrbyggja saga* when Guðleifr lands in *Írland* by accident the intercession of a local chieftain who speaks Norse (and turns out to be Icelandic) saves him and his crew after they had been captured by a large band of angry local inhabitants.[145] Recognition in the saga literature of the importance of interpreters is also shown in an episode from the *biskupa sögur* version of *Gísls þáttr Illugarsonar*, when a dishonest interpreter curses Mýrkjartan *konungr*, endangering the lives of a group of Norse hostages at his court.[146] Fortunately the excellent qualities of the king allow him to see through the interpreter so that he continues to treat the other hostages well.[147] A discussion of language as well as character will feature in Chapter Four of this thesis.

Skrælingar

The *Skrælingar*, usually called Skrælings in English translations, were the native peoples encountered and so-named by Norse explorers and settlers in Greenland and

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[142] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 13, 21 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 27–8 and 54–9); cf. Kalinke, 'Foreign Language Requirement', pp. 850–8; Townend, *Language and History*, 146–8; Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 499.
[143] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 496.
[144] *Flóamanna saga*, chs. 16, 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 262–3 and 309–10).
[145] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 452); *Þórsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, ch. 2 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 301–2); *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, pp. 176–80).
[146] This Mýrkjartan is Muirchertach Ua Briain, who according to *Orkneyinga saga* was a friend and partner of Gísl's king Magnús *berfœttr*, chs. 41–3 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 100–2); Mundal, 'King Magnús', pp. 240–4.
[147] *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar* (*Biskupa sögur I*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and P. Foote, pp. 333–4).

North America or 'Vínland'.[148] The term appears to have been used indiscriminately of the Dorset people, Thule people and Native Americans, and is thought to refer to their 'puny' size and strength, in Icelandic eyes.[149] It has been suggested that the *Skrælingar* encountered in North America in the *Íslendingasögur* (specifically the Vínland sagas, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grænlendinga saga*) were Dorset people, who to Norse observers would have seemed similar to the Thule culture Inuits encountered later in Greenland and also referred to as *Skrælingar*.[150] However, there is for the most part a scholarly consensus that the *Skrælingar* described in the Vínland sagas were a Native American tribe, possibly the ancestors of the Beothuk.[151] Certainly the descriptions in the two sagas of the natives are reconcilable with later sources for the appearance of the Beothuk, but as with any saga source it is difficult to distinguish historical fact from the ethnocentric stereotypes that had developed by the time the sagas were written, or even from the inventions of the saga author.[152] The use of skin-covered boats by the *Skrælingar* in the sagas suggests that part at least of the Icelandic cultural memory of people in Vínland was in fact based on encounters with the Inuit, either historical or contemporary. However, Native American peoples certainly lived in skin tents, as described in the Vínland sagas, and some may also have used skin boats.[153]

Of all the *Íslendingasögur*, the *Skrælingar* are mentioned only in *Eiríks saga rauða*, *Grænlendinga saga* and in passing in *Eyrbyggja saga*.[154] In each of the first two they appear several times in slight variations in the two texts, but ultimately play the same major role in each, that is preventing the establishment of a permanent settlement in Vínland. The dating of these two main texts is highly uncertain and as recently as 2001 a

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[148] See footnote 59 above for a discussion of the name 'Vínland'.

[149] Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', pp. 21–2; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 472; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 70–1.

[150] Ingstad, *Westward to Vinland*, pp. 78–82; cf. Arneborg, 'Norse Settlement in Greenland', pp. 129–31; archaeological evidence from L'Anse aux Meadows shows that Native American and Dorset Culture groups had both settled in the area at various times in the preceding 5000 years, Wallace Ferguson, 'L'Anse aux Meadows and Vínland', p. 139, footnote 1; Odess, Loring, Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', pp. 193–205.

[151] Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", p. 20; other suggestions include the ancestors of the modern Mi'kmaq people, Wallace Ferguson, 'L'Anse aux Meadows and Vínland', p. 143 and Wallace, 'L'Anse aux Meadows', p. 126; or the Innu, or quite possibly several different peoples, Odess, Loring, Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', pp. 203–5; Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, p. 25; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', pp. 91–2; McAleese, 'Skrælingar Abroad', pp. 355–63.

[152] Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", pp. 20–1.

[153] Odess, Loring, Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', pp. 200–1, 205; Páll Bergþórsson discusses historical evidence to support the depiction of the *Skrælingar* in the Vínland sagas in *Wineland Millennium*, pp. 215–21.

[154] *Eiríks saga rauða*, chs. 10–12; *Grænlendinga saga*, chs. 5, 7; *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 48 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 226–34, 254–7, 260–4 and 135).

major publication on the Vínland sagas included articles tentatively arguing for composition dates up to a century apart for both sagas, with one arguing that *Eiríks saga rauða* was written first, and the other the inverse. All we can be sure of is that the oldest surviving manuscripts of each are from the fourteenth century, *Eiríks saga rauða* in *Hauksbók,* AM 544 4to from around 1306–8, and *Grænlendinga saga* in Flateyjarbók, GKS 1005 fol., from 1387. The only other surviving vellum manuscript of either is a somewhat fuller, and probably closer to the original, fifteenth-century version of *Eiríks saga rauða* in Skálholtsbók, AM 557 4to.[155]

The reference to *Skrælingar* in *Eyrbyggja saga* is an oft neglected but important source, as it differs from both sagas by asserting that a man named Snorri Þórbrandsson died fighting the *Skrælingar*. In *Eiríks saga rauða* Snorri features as Karlsefni's right-hand man, but he survives the only battle with the *Skrælingar*; *Grænlendinga saga* does not mention him at all. This must mean that in the mid thirteenth century when *Eyrbyggja* saga was probably composed there was at least one other tradition about the adventures of the Norsemen in Vínland in addition to (or perhaps preceding) those given in the Vínland sagas, and one which emphasized the danger posed by the *Skrælingar*.[156]

The *Skrælingar*, however, were known to the Icelanders long before any of these sagas was composed. Ari Þorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók*, written around 1130, mentions *Skrælingar* in passing when describing the settlement of Greenland, associating them also with Vínland.[157] This passage strongly echoes the traces of *írskr* holy men he says were left in Iceland, so that the two settlement processes follow a similar pattern, though with different implications.[158] The *írskr* artefacts of Iceland mark it as a Christian place, and *Skræling* artefacts in Greenland mark it as an inherently marginal and uncivilized place.[159] Ari's association of *Skræling* artefacts in Greenland with Vínland may indicate that at that time the term was linked as strongly with the Native Americans of Vínland as with the Thule culture Inuits of Greenland and the high Arctic; contact in Greenland itself

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[155] Ólafur Halldórsson favours early thirteenth-century dates, and dates *Grænlendinga saga* as the older of the two in his article 'Vínland Sagas', pp. 40–3, while Helgi Þorláksson suggests late thirteenth-century or fourteenth century dates and proposes that *Eiríks saga rauða* is the older in 'Vínland Sagas in a Contemporary Light', pp. 66 and 75; Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, p. 15.

[156] Andersson speculatively dates *Eyrbyggja saga* to 'the middle of the [thirteenth] century or a little later', *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 153.

[157] Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 264–5.

[158] *Íslendingabók*, ch. 1 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 5); cf. *Landnámabók*, ch. 1 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 31–2); see also Grønlie, *Íslendingabók*, footnote 57 on p. 23.

[159] Grove, 'Place of Greenland', pp. 34–5; Lewis-Simpson, 'Role of Material Culture', pp. 578–9.

may have been limited up until about 1130.[160] However, the *Historia Norwegie* from the second half of the twelfth century describes the *Skrælingar* as living to the north of the Greenland settlements and using weapons made of walrus tooth, a detail which is suggestive of the Late Dorset culture, so it may be that contact in Greenland had increased in the interim to the point where the Inuit had become the more familiar type of *Skrælingar*.[161] The Vínland sagas do not, however, seem to have been influenced by the *Historia Norwegie* version, which also makes the fantastical claim that when cut (unless mortally) the *Skrælingar* do not bleed; instead they place the *Skrælingar* firmly in Vínland in accordance with the older view of their location and nature.[162]

In this case the depictions of the *Skrælingar* in the Vínland sagas will reflect an established set of stereotypes about the appearance and behaviour of this people, assumptions which were well-known to both authors and audiences of the sagas. To summarize briefly, these stereotypes are smallness, ugliness, cowardice, use of magic, stupidity and primitivity.[163] This is the most comprehensively damning set of stereotypes of any of the 'barbarians' the Icelanders came into contact with, which surely reflects the fact that the *Skrælingar* were more remote geographically and temporally (there having not been, so far as we know, any significant attempts to settle Vínland after the early eleventh century) as well as harder to communicate with and more physically different than the *Skotar* or *Írar*.[164] However, as Sverrir Jakobsson points out, even the *Skrælingar* were not without hope of Christian (and cultural) redemption, for two captured boys are baptized and taught to speak, after which they are able to join Norse society.[165]

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[160] *Íslendingabók*, ch. 6 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 13–4); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', p. 89; Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Vínland Sagas', p. 45; Ingstad, *Westward to Vinland*, p. 29; cf. Seaver, *Frozen Echo*, pp. 37–42.

[161] *Historia Norwegie*, ch. 1 (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, p. 55; discussion of dating pp. 11–24); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 89, 94 and 99; Arneborg, 'Norse Settlement in Greenland', pp. 129–31; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 70, 79–80 and 84.

[162] Arneborg, 'Norse Settlement in Greenland', p. 129; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', p. 94; where or what Vínland actually was, or was thought to be by the medieval Icelanders, is debatable, as Sverrir Jakobsson discusses in his critical article 'Vinland and Wishful Thinking', pp. 493–514.

[163] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 94–5, 97–8 and 101; Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", pp. 21–6.

[164] Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', p. 72.

[165] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', p. 97; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 216; Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", p. 26; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', p. 94; compare with references to *Serkir* in Old Norse literature, Cole, 'Racial Thinking', pp. 27–8.

In the exploration of these multiple negative stereotypes, the *Skrælingar* will feature regularly throughout this thesis. As the most barbaric of all the barbarians encountered in the *Íslendingasögur*, they are an invaluable tool for assessing Icelandic relationships with 'Others'. By a happy coincidence, the Vínland sagas are also among the most learned of the sagas, so the portrayal of the *Skrælingar* actively invites comparisons with barbarians in wider classical and European literature.

Finnar

It is also worth mentioning the *Finnar* at this point, as some contemporary depictions of these peoples are similar to those of the *Skrælingar*, though the *Finnar* feature only briefly and very occasionally in the *Íslendingasögur*, being a more common feature (and more negatively portrayed) in sagas set in Norway such as the *konungasögur*.[166] In *Egils saga* the *Finnar* are a source of tribute for the Norwegian crown, part of which is paid in animal furs such as beaver, and are generally cooperative and friendly, provided the tax collectors have sufficient force with them; however, wilder and less cooperative peoples live beyond the *Finnar* and both raid them and are targets for raiding.[167] In *Vatnsdæla saga* a Sámi woman foresees Ingimundr settling in Iceland, and uses magic to send an amulet of his to Iceland to wait for him in the wood where he will establish his farm; although Ingimundr is angry at first, this prophecy turns out to be favourable for him.

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[166] DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', pp. 258–9; DeAngelo asserts that the depiction of the *Finnar* is consistent and negative across three genres of Old Norse literature, the *konungasögur*, the *Íslendingasögur*, and the *fornaldarsögur*, but in fact, as he points out himself, the only two depictions of the *Finnar* (excluding some tenuous associations by descent) in the *Íslendingasögur* are neutral and positive, p. 264. Nonetheless, medieval Icelanders would surely have been familiar with the negative, magic-using *Finnar* of *Heimskringla* and other *konungasögur*, and this depiction has much in common with the Othering of the *Skrælingar*; Bandlien, 'Marginality', 261; Lindow, 'Supernatural Others', pp. 10–2. As with *Skrælingar*, *Finnar* is a name given to the natives of northern Scandinavia by other Scandinavians, and may have its origins in an association with a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and the Old Norse verb *finna* ('to find') (Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, pp. 116–7), though it is certainly related to the Latin *fenni* used by Tacitus in the *Germania*, Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 98 and footnote 1 (p. 113).

[167] *Egils saga*, chs. 10–17 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 27–43); this neutral or positive portrayal is surprising if one accepts that Snorri Sturluson is the author of both *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla*, in which the *Finnar* are portrayed consistently negatively; cf. Aalto, 'Alienness in *Heimskringla*', pp. 1–7; Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 107; Zachrisson, 'South Saami Culture', pp. 191–9; McAleese, 'Skrælingar Abroad', pp. 354–5; Lindow agrees that the authors of *Egils saga* and *Heimskringla* share an interest in the *Finnar*, but does not reconcile the problem of the rather different attitude each has to them, 'Cultures in Contact', pp. 93–106; Turville-Petre gives some of the traditional reasons for arguing that both were written by Snorri Sturluson, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, p. 229.

When he decides to obey the prophecy he first sends three *Finnar* to look for his amulet; they travel by magic while their bodies are locked in a shed, and return after three nights with news of Iceland and his amulet.[168] A *Finnr* on skis is also used as a token pagan representing the non-Christian parts of Scandinavia in a formal truce statement recited in *Grettis saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga*.[169] Due to the similarities in the portrayal of the *Finnar* in other texts with that of the *Skrælingar* they will feature irregularly in this thesis, but will not share the central focus given to the *Skotar*, *Írar* and *Skrælingar*.

Other Theory

There are a number of theoretical approaches that can be applied to saga material that describes interaction between Icelanders and foreigners, the most relevant of which is Other theory. Other theory is, in the words of *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, 'a highly ambiguous term referring, in Lacanian usage, to one pole of a subject-object dialectic, to alterity in general and, usually when capitalized, to the symbolic and the Unconscious'. It has its origins in Hegelian philosophy, and in Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel, which undoubtedly influenced the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his theory of 'The Mirror-stage', when a child sees itself in a mirror and simultaneously undergoes a process of identification and alienation, leading to a response to other children in which there is both identification and aggression. Gender is integral to Other theory, especially where it relates to the individual, and Julia Kristeva's work on 'feminine genius', the integral spirit and power of a woman, can be seen as a solution to the alienation of the mirror-stage, which for cultural reasons presents an even greater challenge to women than it does to men. The essential role played by speech and language in society and, therefore, relationships between others as well as between the individual and society, is also a theme in Kristeva's writing, as is the otherness and alienation inherent in and expressed through nationalism.[170]

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[168] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 10–12 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 29–36).

[169] *Grettis saga*, ch. 72 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 232–3); *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch. 33 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 312–3); Lindow, 'Cultures in Contact', pp. 89–91.

[170] *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*; the other, p. 521; mirror-stage, p. 455; Lacan, pp. 391–4; Kojève, pp. 381–2; Kristeva, pp. 383–8; Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, especially pp. 7–19; Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism*, especially pp. 1–4, 33–6, and in relation to the original barbarians, pp. 18–21.

This thesis will use Other theory as a way of understanding relations between individuals or groups which can be considered, or consider themselves, different from each other. As Steven Shankman writes, 'the Other [is commonly viewed as] the person who is quintessentially "different" from ourselves, especially in the sense of being culturally, racially, sexually "different"'.[171] In this traditional interpretation there is an additional recognition of what Ryszard Kapuściński describes as 'the belief that whatever is far away is different, and the farther away it is, the more different it is.'[172] This Otherness, however, is a construction, a mirror on a society which reveals that society through the way it characterizes other societies.[173] It defines the essential beliefs and behaviour which make one a member of the primary society through description of the culture of an Other society, and can strengthen and unify a society by contrasting those values against those of the Other.[174] In the *Íslendingasögur* it commonly takes the form of overlapping binary pairs: him and her, us and them, Christian and pagan, Icelandic and foreign, north and south, civilized and barbaric, and so on.[175] In a medieval Icelandic context Norwegians can be seen as the primary and binary Other, from whom the Icelanders came, and against whom they need to assert their independence and separate identity, but every character from outside Iceland is, on a societal level, an Other.[176] In psychoanalytical terms in fact all characters in the sagas except the subject of any given sentence or chapter is, in relation to the subject, Other on an individual level, but this Otherness falls outside the remit of this study.

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171 Shankman, *Other Others*, p. 15; Aalto, 'World View', p. 319.
172 Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 15–6.
173 Kapuściński, *The Other*, p. 19; Aalto, *Categorizing Otherness*, p. 13; Bartlett, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', pp. 49–50.
174 Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 1–2; this idea has been applied to Old Norse literature by a number of scholars, including: Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 163–4; Aalto, 'World View', pp. 319–20; Lindow, 'Supernatural Others', pp. 18 and 28; Cardew, '*Mannfögnuður er oss at smjöri þessu*', p. 149; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', pp. 215–7, 229–30 and 237.
175 Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', p. 17; Aalto, 'World View', pp. 322–5; Lindow, 'Social Semantics', pp. 214–6 and 220; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 237; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Emergence of the North', p. 79.
176 Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', pp. 55–6 and 67; Aalto, 'World View', pp. 321–2.

Icelanders and the Other

The significance of Other theory for a study of barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* is apparent, because the 'barbarian' is by definition Other, more so than other foreigners.[177] Fundamentally this arises because he speaks a different language, but it manifests itself in every description of him, from appearance to behaviour and culture, and necessitates that the barbarian not be trusted on account of his Otherness.[178] So in the sagas characters who are clearly 'barbarian', which is to say, characters who speak a different language and also have cultural customs and values which are portrayed as being both different and (importantly) inferior to those of the Icelanders, are, according to Other theory, a mirror for the Icelanders themselves.[179]

The immediate application of this theory means that when the *Skrælingar* trade all their valuable possessions for milk, are amazed and confused by metal, and sleep under upturned boats, the implication is that they are culturally and technologically inferior to the Icelanders.[180] When *skozkr* characters run from danger, fight battles using devious tactics, and worship giants, the Icelanders make a claim for their own moral and religious superiority; and when the *Írar* attack helpless merchants, imprison them and steal their goods, the Icelanders appear more hospitable and more civilized in their own dealings with foreigners.[181]

However, Other theory has the potential to reveal much more about the *Íslendingasögur*, for it can also be applied to foreign individuals on a personal level. To start with examples from the Vínland sagas, this can be observed in the interactions between Karlsefni and his *skozkr* servants, and between the Greenlanders and the *Skrælingar*.[182] The Otherness of Haki and Hekja is emphasized from their introduction, from their outlandish appearance, and most tellingly because they are denied the

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[177] Cf. Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', pp. 229–30.
[178] Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 18–9 and 73; Jones, 'Image of the Barbarian', pp. 377–9; Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 243–4; Cole, 'Hebrew in Runic Inscriptions', p. 43.
[179] DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 261; Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 165–6 and 180; Aalto, 'Alienness in *Heimskringla*', pp. 1–7; McAleese, 'Skrælingar Abroad', p. 354; cf. Lupher, *Romans in a New World*, pp. 226–9.
[180] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 181–2; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 471; Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 239.
[181] Cf. Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, pp. 19–20.
[182] *Eiríks saga rauða*, chs. 8, 10–12; *Grœnlendinga saga*, chs. 4, 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 223, 226–34, 254–7 and 260–4); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 183–4; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 452.

opportunity to speak. According to Levinas' theories of the Other, conversation is the fundamental act of recognition, and an inability to communicate therefore naturally makes a person Other.[183] The importance of the language barrier when Icelanders meet barbarians also occurs in encounters with the *Skrælingar*, and in other sagas with the *Írar*.[184] Karlsefni speaks for Haki and Hekja, thereby keeping them at arms' length and maintaining their Otherness, and in every situation where communication is difficult or impossible a separation and inevitably hostility between groups is created.[185] This occurs within Icelandic society too, when witches have their faces covered to prevent them from looking at or speaking to, and thereby causing harm to, 'normal' characters; the witch must die, and any communication with him or her would only confuse the issue.[186]

Another personal aspect of Other theory highlighted by Levinas is that of the face, and occasionally the importance of the face in bridging Otherness can be observed in the *Íslendingasögur*.[187] In *Grænlendinga saga* a failure to communicate with the *Skrælingar* results in conflict, and this conflict rages for a time until Karlsefni's attention is drawn to a tall and handsome individual among the natives, who he takes to be their leader (this is presumably because his features more closely resemble those of the Norsemen than the others).[188] Once this direct face-to-face contact has been made the battle peters out and there are no more descriptions of violence between Norse and native. Similarly, in *Eyrbyggja saga* when Guðleifr is stranded in Ireland he comes under threat from a faceless horde of natives, but after our attention is drawn to a *mikill maðr ok garpligr* who has just arrived on the scene the situation rapidly develops into one where dialogue and cooperation with those who had been Other a moment before becomes both possible and preferable.[189] Interestingly, the distinguished-looking chieftain in *Eyrbyggja saga* turns out to be an Icelander, not a local, which, needless to say, explains why he not only

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[183] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 7–8; see also Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 65–9.
[184] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 183–4.
[185] Kapuściński, *The Other*, p. 73.
[186] *Laxdæla saga*, chs. 35–8 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 95–111); *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 20 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 53–4); *Gísla saga*, ch. 19 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 60).
[187] Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 8–10.
[188] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 262–4); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 183; compare with a large and handsome man assumed by the *Norðmenn* to be the leader of the *Saraceni* during a battle in *Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 88 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 226–8); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 234; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Vinland and Wishful Thinking', pp. 508–9.
[189] 'Tall and martial-looking man', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 176–180).

looks different but also behaves in a more civilized manner than the *Írar* who first captured the Icelanders.[190]

One might expect the Icelanders to struggle with the idea that barbarian Others are individuals at all, particularly the *Skrælingar* who are the most Other of all, but the recognition of the handsome leader, the conversation between Guðríðr and her *skræling* namesake and the raising of two captured and converted *skræling* children within the Norse community suggests they do recognize their common humanity with the natives.[191] In *Eiríks saga rauða* when they casually murder a group of *Skrælingar* it is justified with the assertion that they assumed the natives were outlaws, and therefore, under Icelandic law, could be killed without retribution; on the other hand, in a similar episode in *Grænlendinga saga* no such justification is given.[192]

Icelanders as the Other

The relevance of Other theory to this discussion is not, however, limited to barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur*. As has been and will regularly be noted in this thesis, the literature of medieval Iceland developed in the context of contact with mainland Europe, Britain, Ireland and Scandinavia.[193] The arrival of historical and literary texts from centres of power and religion that could not be matched in Iceland in terms of their influence, religious significance or their material culture undoubtedly inspired Icelandic authors, but it must have challenged them too.[194] An Icelander could read Sallust's version of events in Rome, the most important place in his religion, from 900 years before Iceland was even discovered, or Geoffrey of Monmouth on the legendary founding of Britain by Brutus, a hero of Troy. In doing so that Icelander would discover that the little world in which he perhaps was an important person, was only a small,

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[190] For a description of the personal characteristics of Icelandic chieftains in the sagas see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power*, pp. 84–101.
[191] Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 102–3; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 238.
[192] *Grænlendinga saga*, chs. 4, 6; *Eiríks saga rauða*, chs. 11, 12 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 223, 262–4, 230 and 233–4); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 191; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 470; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', p. 94.
[193] Tulinius, 'Self as Other', pp. 199–203; Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 161 and 166–9.
[194] Tulinius, 'Self as Other', pp. 206–209; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'State formation', p. 77.

undistinguished, and peripheral place.[195] The outside world was larger and older than he could have imagined in his preliterate days, and it was definitely Other. Worse in fact, because it must have been apparent that his own society was, by comparison with this power and culture, inferior and even barbaric. In the medieval period the literate Icelander was brutally confronted with his own status as an Other on many of the scales by which such things were measured in the rest of Europe.[196]

As has been discussed in the introductory section on contemporary Latin works, the challenge from Europe regarding Iceland's relative lack of civilization was expressed most directly in the works of Scandinavian authors such as Theodoricus Monachus and Saxo Grammaticus, in the history of Adam of Bremen, and briefly in the *Historia Norwegie*. They characterize Iceland as barbarous, poor, and as a land of strange natural wonders, all of which serve to emphasize the Otherness and barbarity of Iceland.[197] Some if not all of these authors must surely have been known in Iceland, or at the very least encountered abroad by travelling Icelanders, and there are stories of Icelanders encountering these attitudes more generally while abroad, at least with regard to their simple diet.[198]

A number of Icelandic works are clearly directly influenced by a desire to include Scandinavian history, and therefore their own history, as part of a greater world history stretching back to the Mediterranean, Troy and the Old Testament, as well as to claim genealogical descent from the Trojans and ultimately the gods.[199] For example, Snorri's *Heimskringla* begins by casting Óðinn as the ruler of a great Eastern kingdom

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[195] The geographical marginality of Iceland in relation to Norway was already recognized by the tradition of referring to its location as *út* ('out'), Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', p. 61, and to discover a greater world beyond Norway must have reinforced this sense of being on the periphery; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', p. 27; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Emergence of the North', p. 80; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Centre and Periphery', pp. 918–9.

[196] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Introduction', pp. 77–8.

[197] DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 260; Cardew, '*Mannfögnuður er oss at smjöri þessu*', p. 147; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 209–10.

[198] *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar* (*Biskupa sögur I*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and P. Foote, p. 322); *Jarteinabók Þorláks Byskups Önnur*, ch. 133 (*Biskupa sögur II*, ed. Àsdís Egilsdóttir, p. 227); *Lárentíus saga*, ch. A18/B22 (*Biskupa sögur III*, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 271–2); *Halldórs þáttr I* (*Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 253); *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr* (*Austfirðinga sǫgur,* ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 348); Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 14–5; see further discussion of this theme in the next chapter of this thesis.

[199] Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 162, 217, 317 and 331; Faulkes, 'Descent from the gods', pp. 95, 100–6 and 110–24; Tétrel, 'Trojan Origins', p. 490; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 220; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Hauksbók and the Construction of an Icelandic World View', pp. 27–31 and 36; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'State formation', pp. 76–7.

encompassing much of Asia and as far west as Turkey. In order to avoid conflict with the Romans he moved north into Russia, then Saxony and finally Scandinavia, where he established a kingdom ruled by the gods.[200] One 'must either have a history or be primitive and uncivilized', and so the Icelanders set about creating a mythical prehistory for themselves.[201]

However, it is the contention of this thesis that another subtler result of contact with the wider European literary tradition can be found in the way the sagas construct an inferior Other. If the Icelanders felt their own claim to civilization and high culture was in question then it is logical to suppose that they would shift this accusation on to other peoples in an attempt to place themselves among the civilized, looking out and down on the less civilized, and the European texts they were familiar with provided models for doing this. The mirror idea of Other theory does not just help with creating an Icelandic identity, it could also be used to associate that identity with the other (European) societies towards which they aspired.[202]

By this logic it is understandable that Iceland is made to be the 'norm' and 'centre' in the *Íslendingasögur*, where the paranormal and unusual happens rarely and usually as a result of foreign characters. Vínland and Greenland, the Icelandic interior and the far north of Norway, and occasionally *Írland* and *Skotland*, are the new peripheries which the Icelandic authors substitute for the role given to Iceland in the wider European literature.[203] Wild vines, strange natives living underground, monopods, giants, haunted tombs, and magicians; all represent the fringes of the world both geographically and socially, and each time they occur in association with non-Icelandic characters and places, Iceland becomes more 'central' by comparison.[204] The mirror works.

Conversely, where there is contact with other European groups, cooperation and recognition of Icelandic characters as equals is presented as the norm. Although

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[200] *Ynglinga saga*, chs. 2–9 (*Heimskringla*, vol. 1, Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 11–23); cf. Snorri's alternative version which specifically gives Troy as the place of origin, *Edda*, Prologue, chs. 4–11 (ed. A. Faulkes, pp. 4–6); Lindow, 'Cultures in Contact', p. 97.

[201] Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, p. 19; Lindow, 'Social Semantics', p. 216; Sverrir Jakobsson, *Við og veröldin*, p. 367; Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 42–3.

[202] DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 263–5; cf. Bandlien, 'Marginality', p. 261; Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 257; Cole, 'Racial Thinking', p. 38; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 192.

[203] DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 259 and 279; on Greenland as a marginal place compared to Iceland see Barraclough, 'World West of Iceland', pp. 99–105; Grove, 'Place of Greenland', pp. 34–55; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 64–5.

[204] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 169; Hastrup, *Culture and History*, pp. 136–7 and 144–5.

Norwegian royalty sometimes play a more complicated role (for other reasons to do with Icelandic independence and identity) in general Scandinavian and English kings accept Icelanders and value them above any of the men of their own country.[205] The material culture of England and Norway is celebrated by the high honour in which gifts such as swords and cloaks are held by their Icelandic recipients.[206] In terms of religion, a number of Icelandic characters are associated with Rome by undertaking pilgrimages there and receiving absolution, in Flosi's case from the Pope himself, while others are associated with the other centre of Christian power and religion, Byzantium.[207]

In summary, an undercurrent runs through many of the sagas, namely a desire to be considered equal in terms of culture and civilization to societies in the rest of Europe.[208] Other theory highlights this desire by drawing attention to the significance of depictions of barbarians for Icelandic self-identity as well as providing guidance for why barbarians are portrayed in the ways they are.

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[205] Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', p. 57; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', pp. 13–7 and especially footnote 37 on p. 17.

[206] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, chs. 11–13 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 90–1, 102–3 and 107)); *Egils saga*, ch. 85 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 296–8).

[207] Pilgrimages to Rome can be found in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 158–9 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 461–2); *Grettis saga*, chs. 91–2 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 286–9); *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 9 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 269); also a number of *þættir* including for example *Auðunar þáttr vestfirska* (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 359–68) and *Þórarins þáttr stuttfeldar* (*Complete Sagas of Icelanders I*, pp. 360–1). Stories of Icelanders who become highly valued at court in Byzantium include *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 81 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 197); *Grettis saga*, chs. 85–91 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 270–88); *Laxdæla saga*, chs 73, 77 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 213–5 and 224–5); *Finnboga saga ramma*, chs. 18–20 (*Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 286–9); cf. Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 190–1; Lindow, 'Social Semantics', p. 215; Springer, 'Mediaeval Pilgrim Routes', pp. 95–102; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Centre and Periphery', pp. 920–2.

[208] Clunies Ross, *Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 11,

Chapter One: Diet and Food Production

In medieval Europe historians and geographers included the production and consumption of food in their depictions of other societies and cultures.[1] Like the Romans and other peoples before them, they tended to assume that agriculture, the production of grain, and a diet based on bread was civilized.[2] In contrast, societies described as having a diet largely dependent on wild fruit and meat, as well as on pastoral activities and the consumption of dairy products, were characterized as being savage or barbaric. This attitude can be summarized as a belief in a hierarchy of civilization level based on diet, in which savages hunt and gather their food, barbarians tend their flocks and herds, and the civilized grow crops.[3] Authors such as Gerald of Wales and Adam of Bremen falsely presented the Welsh and Irish, and the Norwegians, Swedes, and Icelanders respectively, as choosing a pastoral over an agricultural lifestyle.[4] The implication was that this choice represented their level of civilization, and the representation appears in some cases to have been deliberate and unjust. In Wales, for example, the archaeological evidence suggests that the Welsh were much more sedentary than Gerald presents them, indicating that this type of depiction was politically or ethnically motivated.[5]

Iceland

From the historical and archaeological evidence it is clear that in medieval Iceland there was little cultivation of arable land. Grain was grown in small quantities all over Iceland during the first centuries of occupation, but by the time the sagas were being written in the thirteenth century it was a precious resource, grown only in a few places in the south, and a valuable import commodity.[6] There are occasional references to agriculture in the *Íslendingasögur*, most obviously the slaying of Hǫskuldr Njálsson by his foster brothers early one morning when he has gone out to sow grain, and Gunnarr's decision not to

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[1] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 158–9.
[2] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 162; Jones, 'Image of the Barbarian', p. 376.
[3] Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, pp. 19–20.
[4] Cf. Lindow, 'Cultures in Contact', pp. 91–2.
[5] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 160–2 and 176; the *Finnar* were also cultivating land during the Viking Age, but there is no suggestion of this in medieval Icelandic literature; on the other hand this was sometimes with slash-and-burn techniques that meant they were not entirely sedentary, and the Sámi, who the Icelanders referred to with the same name, continued to live a non-agrarian lifestyle, so the Icelandic image of the *finnskr* relationship to agriculture may have been the product of ignorance rather than malice; Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, p. 117.
[6] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, pp. 57–60; Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 45–6.

leave home when he looks back at the 'bleikir akrar ok slegin tún' and sees how beautiful they are.[7] However, these are far outweighed by descriptions of hunting seals and birds, scavenging from beached whales, gathering eggs and plants, and raising horses, cattle, and sheep.[8] The description in *Egils saga* of Skallagrímr setting up several dependent farms in different places to take advantage of the local resources, including grain in one particular area, demonstrates the idea that diversification in food production and gathering was associated with prosperity.[9]

However, the dominance of cattle can be seen from their acceptance as a standard of value, with ownership of five cows entitling a tenant to the legal status of *bóndi* ('farmer'), and they also provided much of a household's nutrition in the form of dairy and occasionally meat.[10] Sheep were also important to early Icelandic society as a source for Iceland's main export, *vaðmál* (woollen 'homespun cloth'), which was traded to Norway for grain and timber, and which gave Iceland another early standard of value, *alnir* ('ells').[11] By necessity, farming along with fishing remained the backbone of the Icelandic economy until the twentieth century, and traditions in Iceland of hunting and gathering food to supplement these activities remain strong today, particularly among the older generations.[12]

With this heavy dependence on livestock characterizing Icelandic society from its earliest days, the majority of the work done in the 'homefields', the good land around the farmstead, was directed towards the production of hay to support the livestock through the winter, and episodes in *Njáls saga*, *Hænsna-Þóris saga*, and *Bjarnar saga*

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[7] 'Pale fields and mown home-meadow', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 111 and 75; when Flosi learns of Hǫskuldr's slaying he uses a proverb that refers to sowing bad seed, ch. 115, and Gunnarr too is wounded while out sowing seed, ch. 53; see also chs. 9, 11, 109 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 280, 182, 288, 134, 30, 33–4 and 279); it is not surprising that *Njáls saga* seems to refer to grain growing more than others since it is set in the south of Iceland where agriculture continued throughout the medieval period. There are other saga references to grain crops in *Egils saga*, ch. 29 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 75); *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*, ch. 12 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 139); *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 2 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 126); to *korn á vatni* (grain on water) in a verse in *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19, perhaps a reference to the process of soaking grains in water for beer production (*Vatnsdœla saga,* ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 274); to holding a confiscation court away from the farm *hvárki er akr né eng* ('where there is neither field nor meadow'), *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, ch. 5 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur,* ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 120); in *Víga-Glúms saga* a dispute over a valuable *akr* is cause for a killing, chs. 7–8 (pp. 22–8), see also discussion of the type of grain grown on this field, probably barley, by Holtsmark, 'Vitazgjafi', pp. 118–9. Other references to grain and flour are as a valuable imported trade good: in the Möðruvallabók version (AM 132, fol.) of *Bandamanna saga* to buying malt and grain in the Orkneys, ch. 11 (*Grettis saga*, ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 358); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 2, 6, 32, 119, 139, 158 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 10, 20–1, 83, 299, 370 and 462); wheat and honey imported into Norway by Egil, *Egils saga*, ch. 62 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 196–7).

[8] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 46–8.

[9] *Egils saga*, ch. 29 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 75–6).

[10] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, pp. 52, 54, 60.

[11] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, p. 67; Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 50.

[12] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, pp. 45–6; Lacy, *Ring of Seasons*, pp. 44–6.

Hítdælakappa demonstrate the critical importance of producing enough hay to last the winter.[13] Some of the first settlers transported with them grain and fishing gear to Iceland, but livestock was the primary commodity brought by settlers in order to survive their first winter and set up a farmstead.[14] Unlike other places settled during the Norse diaspora such as the fertile machair of the Hebrides and the rich soils of eastern England, Iceland remained dependent on livestock throughout the period when the sagas were written.[15] Agriculture was certainly familiar to the Icelanders from their travels abroad, and at least thirty surviving *akur* placenames and another nine *korn* placenames demonstrate that in some past time land was cultivated where possible.[16] Therefore, it must have been the natural limitations of the land that prevented them from practising it more widely in the early centuries, rather than laziness or backwardness.

However, the Icelanders would also have been familiar with agriculture from reading classical and medieval texts, and it is these characteristics of laziness and backwardness which they would have felt were levelled against them, both directly and indirectly, in their readings.[17] If this attitude was as widespread among the learned classes of medieval Europe as its proliferation in various texts from across Europe suggests then they would also have come face to face with foreigners who looked down on them on account of the Icelandic diet. Indeed, according to stories from some *biskupa sögur* and short stories a popular insult used by medieval Norwegians for an Icelander was to call him *mǫrlandi* ('suet-lander') due to the popularity of sausages made from sheep suet in Iceland.[18] This dietary slur seems also to have been an insult within Iceland, judging from the treatment Narfi gives Kormákr when trying to end Kormákr's visits to his friend Þorkell's daughter:

> Narfi stóð við ketil, ok er lokit var at sjóða, vá Narfi upp mǫrbjúga ok brá fyrir nasar Kormáki ok kvað þetta:

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[13] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 120–2); *Hænsna-Þóris saga*, chs. 4–5 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 11–16); *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*, ch. 13 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 147–8); Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, pp. 46, 64; Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 46; Hastrup, *Culture and History*, pp. 110–1.
[14] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 14–5.
[15] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, pp. 60–1.
[16] *Ísland Vegaatlas 1:200 000*, pp. 61 and 71.
[17] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 159.
[18] *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar* (*Biskupa sögur I*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and P. Foote, p. 322); *Jarteinabók Þorláks Byskups Önnur*, ch. 133 (*Biskupa sögur II*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, p. 227); *Lárentíus saga*, ch. A18/B22 (*Biskupa sögur III*, ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, pp. 271–2); *Halldórs þáttr I* (*Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 253); *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr* (*Austfirðinga sǫgur,* ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 348); Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 14–5.

Hversu þykkja ketils þér,
Kormákr, ormar?

Hann segir:

Góðr þykkir soðinn mǫrr
syni Ǫgmundar.[19]

Narfi stood by a pot, and when the cooking was finished Narfi lifted up a sausage of fat and meat, shoved it under Kormákr's nose and said this:

As for the snakes of the cauldron,
Kormákr, what do you reckon?

He said:

What the son of Ǫgmundr fancies
is suet, preferably boiled.[20]

Even when not deliberately used insultingly, references to a diet heavily dependent on sheep has negative connotations; suet and meat from sheep is the diet of the outlaw Grettir when hiding in the mountains, and he restricts himself further in Lent, eating only 'mǫr ok lifrar'.[21] Two opposing verses from *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa* neatly synthesize the relationship Icelanders had to grain and suet respectively:

Þá kvað Þórðr vísu til Bjarnar:

Út skaltu ganga,
oss selduð mjǫl

[19] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 4 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 216).
[20] Poetry from the translation by Rory McTurk, *Complete Sagas I* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, pp. 184–5), all prose my own translation.
[21] 'Suet and liver', *Grettis saga*, ch. 61 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 200).

rautt áliti,
rúg sagðir þú,
en þegar 's virðar
vatni blendu,
vas þat aska ein,
út skaltu ganga.

Bjǫrn kvað í móti:

Kyrr munk sitja,
komk á hausti,
hefk fornan mǫr
fullu keyptan;
feld gǫfuð mér
fagrrǫggvaðan,
kappsvel drepinn,
kyrr munk sitja.[22]

Then Þórðr spoke a verse to Bjǫrn:

Out you must go!
Grain you sold me
red to look at,
rye you called it.
But when people put it in water,
it turned to ashes.
Out you must go!

Bjǫrn countered:

Quiet I'll stay.

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[22] *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*, ch. 14 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 148–9).

I came in autumn,
paid full prices
for foul old suet.
A cloak you gave me
gaping with tatters,
elegant, furry;
Quiet I'll stay.[23]

What should have been high-value rye is dismissed by Þórðr as having been bulked out with ash, while Bjǫrn complains that he paid for his stay in good faith and has been poorly repaid with a low-status diet of *fornan mǫr*. He compares this diet to being given a cloak full of holes (perhaps in reference to a tunic received as part of a previous settlement between the two) and 'honum þótti heimboðit Þórðar verit hafa með glysmálum einum, en veitt kotmannliga'. The diet Bjǫrn is offered is itself an insult, though it seems that Þórðr felt himself insulted first because when bread, a high-value product, was served at the table Bjǫrn always gave a share to his dog.[24]

These examples demonstrate the importance of diet within Icelandic society as portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*. In this chapter I will use examples from the two Vínland sagas, *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*, alongside classical and medieval European texts to argue that medieval Icelanders were familiar with and accepted the concept of a hierarchy of diet that differentiated societies and peoples more generally. Indeed, they took advantage of it themselves when describing other cultures in order to make it clear that foreigners such as the *Skrælingar* were less civilized and more worthy of contempt on account of their diets than the Icelanders themselves were. They could not deny that their own society was dependent on the 'barbaric' activities of pastoralism, hunting, fishing and gathering, but they could make these activities look positively metropolitan by comparison if they tried hard enough.

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[23] Poetry from the translation by Alison Finlay, *Complete Sagas I* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, pp. 273–4).
[24] 'He thought Þórðr's invitation to stay had been speciously offered, and meanly honoured', *Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa*, chs. 8 (the settlement), 13–14 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 131 and 146–9).

Vínland

Eiríks saga rauða

The Icelanders of the sagas most obviously come into contact with a society which is portrayed as being less sophisticated when they encounter the *Skrælingar* in North America, as told in *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga*. The difference between the two peoples is juxtaposed against the quality of the land which each inhabits. In Greenland the land is poor and the people depend on fishing and hunting; when the fishing is poor they risk starvation.[25] Leifr Eiríksson's first chance landing in North America reveals by contrast that it is a fertile land with fields of self-sown wheat and vines growing naturally, as well as plenty of high-quality timber, another resource in scant supply in Greenland.[26] Despite having lived for most of his life in the barren lands of Iceland and Greenland, Leifr recognizes the value of these signs and takes samples of all these things; perhaps a previous summer spent in the Hebrides had made him familiar with the potential of agriculture.[27] When the news of this natural bounty reaches Greenland others soon decide to try and make their way there, but an initial attempt ends in failure, with crew and ships returning to Greenland 'væstir ok þrekaðir'.[28]

A few winters later the spectre of starvation raises its head again in Greenland, as Eiríkr speaks of his regret at being unable to entertain his newly arrived guest Karlsefni with as much food as he would have liked. Fortunately Karlsefni has brought with him malt, flour and grain from his home in northern Iceland. As Karlsefni is a merchant it is not clear whether these are the produce of his farm in Iceland, or acquired on one of his trading voyages elsewhere, but as a result a magnificent feast is held which is in stark contrast to the regular fare in Greenland.[29] With this situation in mind it is no wonder that the people in Eiríkr's settlement of Brattahlið spend much of the winter discussing the possibility of a new voyage to Vínland, since Karlsefni and his companions had made a journey possible by arriving with two new ships.[30] The saga's account of a grain-based

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[25] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 206); cf. *Flóamanna saga*, chs. 22–4 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 282–91).
[26] Jones, *Norse Atlantic Saga*, pp. 123–4.
[27] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 5 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 209–10); Batey, 'Islands of Scotland', p. 71.
[28] 'Worn out and exhausted', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 5 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 213).
[29] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 7 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 220).
[30] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 221).

feast and the interest of the Greenlanders in the self-sown wheat of Vínland gain additional meaning if one considers it in the context of increasing grain shortages in thirteenth-century Iceland.[31]

This journey goes more favourably, and after arriving on an unexplored coastline the discovery of grapes and self-sown wheat is once again used as an indication that the explorers have landed in a natural paradise.[32] These resources are brought to Karlsefni's attention by his own 'barbarian' companions, *tvá menn skozka*, a couple called Haki and Hekja. They had been lent to Karlsefni by Leifr Eiríksson, who in turn had been given them by Óláfr Tryggvason when he agreed to try to convert Greenland to Christianity.[33] Haki and Hekja are sent off to explore the land, and after three days they return and 'hafði annat í hendi vínberjakǫngul, en annat hveitiax sjálfsáit'.[34] This pair of resources is a symbolic gesture for the hopes the settlers have for the new land, perhaps a gesture with Biblical connotations referencing the dove bringing a twig back to Noah during the flood, or as Jones and Sverrir Tómasson suggest, the spies scouting in Canaan in the Book of Numbers and returning with grapes.[35] Although one might expect them to recognize the value of wheat growing wild, identifying the potential of the grapes seems less likely for *menn skozka*. In respect of their physical abilities and attire Haki and Hekja are depicted as being savage, like the *Skrælingar*, but unlike the *Skrælingar* they recognize the importance of grapes and wheat. It is hard to assess how much thought went into this episode in terms of the relative civilization of the slaves; if it is only a matter of convenience then the story simply emphasizes how important these two resources were considered by the Norsemen. If it was a thoughtful inclusion then it must be their association with the Norsemen, perhaps their time spent serving Óláfr Tryggvason, that makes the difference; though not civilized in themselves, the author makes a claim that when it comes to diet the *menn skozka* are civilized by association.

In addition to these precious advantages, the land is also said to be plentiful with the foodstuffs they are familiar with from Iceland and Greenland, except in greater supply. There are so many bird eggs that they can hardly walk without stepping on them, and the

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[31] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 50; the climate worsened considerably in the second half of the thirteenth century, Middel, '*Alexanders Saga*', p. 122.
[32] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 173–4; Ingstad, *Westward to Vinland*, p. 71.
[33] 'Two *skozka* people', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).
[34] 'One had in hand a grape-bunch, and the other an ear of self-sown wheat', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).
[35] Jones, *Norse Atlantic Saga*, pp. 283–5; Sverrir Tómasson, 'Ferðir þessa heims', pp. 36–8.

grass grows so well that even when winter comes and the people's poor preparations leave them hungry, their livestock continue to improve. This is in stark contrast to Icelandic winters described in other sagas where the hay runs out and the livestock are at risk of starving before the people.

The weather improves in time for them to replenish their stocks of fish, and when spring comes they resume their traditional Icelandic hunter-gathering habits: hunting game inland, fishing, and gathering bird eggs. Further exploration south along the coast discovers for a third time 'sjálfsána hveitiakra, þar sem lægðir váru, en vínvið allt þar sem holta vissi'. The potential for future exploitation is obvious, and in the meantime the Norsemen are able to resume their fishing and hunting, while their livestock fattens outside on the grass throughout the next winter. There has been no stay permanent enough yet to try and grow any crops, and as it turns out they never get a chance to settle the land properly, for it is in this place of plenty that they first encounter the *Skrælingar*.[36]

Despite the promising landscape, until this point there has been no evidence of human life, never mind agricultural exploitation of the natural resources which were so apparent to the Vikings from their first landing. The natives are not even familiar with domestic livestock, revealing their savage state when they find Karlsefni's bull terrifying and hold the Norsemen responsible for it, as if the animal's threatening behaviour had been sanctioned by the group.[37] The lush growth of grass too, therefore, might be considered through medieval Icelandic eyes to have been wasted under the guardianship of the natives.[38]

Confirmation that the natives do indeed live off game comes when the Vikings capture five natives sleeping beside 'stokka ok í dýramerg, dreyra blandinn'; a dish more primitive even than the suet Icelanders were mocked for.[39] The overall impression is one of a land well-stocked with wild food to support life, but with the potential also to provide its occupants with a much more 'civilized' lifestyle (from a classical and medieval perspective), including bread and wine, if it were occupied by a population with the necessary sophistication and work ethic. There is little mention of the opportunities provided by the timber after Leifr's first landing, so it must be that the

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[36] 'Self-sown wheatfields in the valleys, and vines growing all over the ridges', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 10 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 226–7).
[37] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 194.
[38] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 170–2; Cardew, '*Mannfögnuður er oss at smjöri þessu*', pp. 151–2.
[39] 'Wooden containers, in them deer-marrow mixed with blood', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 230).

plentiful supply of food and potential for more are supposed to be the driving factors behind these attempts to colonize the land. The name 'Vínland' clearly indicates that grapes were the most exciting resource the Norsemen discovered in North America; wine was a luxury associated with the most prominent chieftains of Scandinavia.[40]

It seems probable that there is also a religious element to the discovery of wheat and vines in Vínland. Bread and wine are and were central to Christian practice due to their role in the Eucharist, where their ritual consumption is identified with Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the forgiveness of sins associated with it, so wheat and wine were necessary imports in medieval Iceland, though wine may have been very rare (crowberry wine was sometimes used as a subsitute once the trick of making wine from berries had been learned).[41] Conversion to Christianity and the ensuing tension between pagans and Christians among the early community on Greenland is one of the central themes of the saga. Karlsefni's first tough winter in Vínland is marked by the arrival of a strange whale on the beach, which the grumpy pagan Þórhallr afterwards claims to have been sent to them by Þórr. It makes everyone that eats it ill, so they throw it back into the sea and resort to Christian prayers instead, which prove effective.[42] Despite this initial pagan temptation, the way the whale episode ends and the presence of wheat and vines there means Vínland should be seen as a good home for Christians: an earthly paradise for the newly converted inhabitants of Greenland.[43] It is a land which is wasted on the pagan natives who live there in terms of religion as well as civilization.

The possibility of cultivating vines and making wine is portrayed as being attractive to the pagans among them too, for despite the abundance of game Þórhallr voices his dissatisfaction with the following verse:

> Hafa kvǫðu mik meiðar
> malmþings, es komk hingat,
> mér samir láð fyr lýðum
> lasta, drykk inn bazta;

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[40] Wallace Ferguson, 'L'Anse aux Meadows and Vínland', p. 142.
[41] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 50; Ogilvie, Barlowe and Jennings, 'North Atlantic Climate', p. 182; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Vinland Sagas*, p. xi; Bisgaard, 'Wine and Beer in Medieval Scandinavia', pp. 69–71; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', p. 78; Jón Jóhannesson, *History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, pp. 307–8.
[42] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 224–5).
[43] Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 97–8 and 103; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', pp. 462–3; Sverrir Tómasson, 'Ferðir þessa heims', p. 38; cf. Ólafur Halldórsson, *Eiríks saga rauða*, pp. 388–90; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', p. 78.

Bílds hattar verðr byttu
beiði-Týr at reiða;
heldr 's svát krýpk at keldu;
komat vín á grǫn mína.[44]

With promises of fine drinks
the war-trees wheedled,
spurring me to journey
to these scanty shores.
War-oak of the helmet god,
I now wield but a bucket,
no sweet wine do I sup
stooping at the spring.[45]

Like much of the poetry in the *Íslendingasögur*, these verses are thought to predate the prose, and may even be contemporary with the expeditions to Vínland.[46] For some of the Icelandic settlers at least an abundance of fish and game is clearly not sufficient to motivate them to settle in a new land, when they had access to these things at home. They are in search of a more sophisticated and luxurious lifestyle, including the production of wine, and this seems to be what the new lands they have discovered offer, despite the apparent inability of the natives to take advantage of it. Short of patience, however, Þórhallr leaves after this, and the others too are driven away by the *Skrælingar* before they can begin to exploit the land, leaving it forever a place of unfulfilled agricultural and viticultural promise.[47]

Grœnlendinga saga

In *Grœnlendinga saga* the basic premise is similar, but even more is made of the *Skrælingar*'s lack of sophistication when it comes to foodstuffs. At first, however, the potential of the newly discovered lands for supporting a settler community is the primary

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[44] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 9 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 225).
[45] Translation by Keneva Kunz, *Complete Sagas I* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p. 14).
[46] Jones, *Norse Atlantic Saga*, p. 123.
[47] Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', pp. 474–5.

focus of the saga. It is not, as in *Eiríks saga*, set against a background of food shortages in Greenland, but Greenland is several times described in terms of glaciers and mountains, in contrast to the low hills and woodland of North America.[48] When Leifr Eiríksson makes the first proper landing in North America the richness of the land is emphasized with descriptions of huge numbers of salmon, 'ok stœrra lax en þeir hefði fyrr sét', and grass growing so strongly that it seemed 'at þar myndi engi fénaðr fóðr þurfa á vetrum', just as in *Eiríks saga*. Even the dew on the grass is so sweet that 'þóttusk ekki jafnsœtt kennt hafa, sem þat var.'[49]

As in the other version, the discovery of vines and grapes proves to be the most exciting revelation about the territory, and the first voyage of discovery ends with Leifr Eiríksson loading up his boats with grapes and, less luxuriously but more practically, timber. He names the land Vínland, again signifying the importance of the natural resources there to the Norse inhabitants of Greenland. A second expedition of exploration sustains itself through the winter in Vínland by fishing, and results in the gathering there of grapes and grapevines (or timber of some kind), but also involves a first, hostile, meeting with the natives. Curiously, this meeting is presaged by the discovery of a 'kornhjálm af tré' on one of the islands there. This can be translated in various ways, but the most obvious is 'wooden corn stack', that is, a rack for drying cereals on.[50] This seems to be an anomaly, as there is no other mention of crop-growing in Vínland in *Grœnlendinga saga*, and the saga says specifically that there were no other traces of human life near by. Growing, harvesting, and drying a crop for consumption would require a permanent or at least semi-permanent residence on the island to protect the crop and monitor it ripening, which would leave more obvious traces than a solitary drying rack, and the growing site itself should be obvious. Theoretically it could suggest occasional harvesting of wild grains, or it may just be a thoughtlessly chosen augury for the impending encounter with the natives.[51]

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[48] Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 463.
[49] 'And larger salmon than they had seen before'; 'that there would the livestock need no fodder in the winter'; 'they thought themselves never to have known anything equally sweet as that was', *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 3 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 250–1).
[50] Kunz translates this as 'wooden grain trough', *Complete Sagas I* (ed. Viðar Hreinsson, p. 25); the idea of a drying rack seems more satisfactory for *hjálmr*, though another possible translation could relate to the English 'haulm', a grain (or other crop) stalk (OE *healm)*, O'Donoghue, personal communication. In any case the implication is of human activity related to grain production.
[51] *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 5 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 254–7); Ingstad suggests that the structure could be the still-standing poles of an abandoned tepee, *Westward to Vinland*, p. 79.

A third expedition led by Karlsefni aims to actually settle in Vínland, and they bring the livestock necessary to set up a society on the Icelandic model of sustenance. A stranded whale helps them get started, and while they cut timber for drying they live off 'landkostum, þeir er þar váru, bæði af vínberjum ok alls konar veiðum ok gœðum'.[52] There is no indication in *Grœnlendinga saga* of the possibility of setting up an agriculture-based settlement as suggested by the self-sown wheat which is mentioned several times in *Eiríks saga*. Instead it seems the Icelanders would be happy to maintain their 'less civilized' hunting, gathering and herding lifestyle, except in better conditions than Greenland.

Even this lifestyle, however, is made to look sophisticated by comparison with the *Skrælingar* when they come into closer contact. Once again they demonstrate their ignorance of domestic livestock by fleeing in terror when a bull starts bellowing at them. This is compounded by the unlikely excitement of the natives when they are introduced to dairy products, having previously sought to buy iron weapons:[53]

> Ok nú leitar hann ráðs með þeim hætti, at hann bað konur bera út búnyt at þeim; ok þegar er þeir sá búnyt, þá vildu þeir kaupa þat, en ekki annat. Nú var sú kaupfǫr Skrælinga, at þeir báru sinn varning í brott í mǫgum sínum, en Karlsefni ok fǫrunautar hans hǫfðu eptir bagga þeira ok skinnavǫru.[54]

> And then he found a solution to this dangerous situation, and told the women to bring out milk to them; and once they saw the milk, they wanted to buy that and nothing else. So the trading trip of the *Skrælingar* was such that they carried their purchases away in their stomachs, and Karlsefni and his companions were left with their packs and skins.

The fact that they 'báru sinn varning í brott í mǫgum sínum' makes the natives look foolish and short-sighted in comparison with the canny Norsemen who keep the goods of real value. The main purpose of their expedition is to gather another comestible, grapes, and the cultural difference between the two societies, that one should value wine highly

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[52] 'The produce of the land that was there, both grapes and all kinds of fish, game, and good things', *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 7 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 261).
[53] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 91–2; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', pp. 467–8.
[54] *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 7 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 262).

and the other milk as highly, makes it clear that the *Skrælingar* are being mocked for their enthusiasm for such a basic foodstuff.[55] This story is paralleled by an episode in *Vatnsdæla saga* where Ingimundr pays some *Finnar* for a service with butter and tin — the dairy and metal so prized by the *Skrælingar*.[56] As will be discussed below, classical and other European medieval texts list milk as part of the diet of a barbaric culture, and the Icelanders could not escape the fact that this made their dependence on dairy look unsophisticated. They could, however, make the *Skrælingar* so ridiculous in their enthusiasm for milk and dairy that it makes the Greenlanders appear civilized by comparison. Ultimately this 'othering' reflects back on the Norsemen too, making the case that their dependence on milk is not so very unsophisticated after all, since it is considered so amazing and advanced by the *Skrælingar*.

It is interesting that the theme of food and diet, which recurs so often in both the Vínland sagas, should also be brought up in this context and used to barbarize the *Skrælingar*. In *Eiríks saga* the equivalent passage has the *Skrælingar* enthusiastically trading their wares for smaller and smaller strips of red cloth, but here the author of the saga chooses to make the same point about their backwardness by portraying dairy products as being excessively desirable to the natives. Furthermore, although the *Skrælingar* have access to grapes, and therefore the potential to make wine, as with the potential for grain production in *Eiríks saga*, they do not take advantage of them and as a result look still more savage by comparison with the Norse explorers. The importance given to food production throughout the two sagas may be indicative of the concerns of hungry later medieval Icelanders, dreaming of an unobtainable fantasyland where there is an abundance of everything they need.

Classical and Medieval Europe

The depiction of the *Skrælingar* in the Vínland sagas with respect to diet and food production can be summarized into the following two points, each represented in both

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[55] Baitsholts, 'First European Accounts', p. 366.
[56] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 12 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 34 and footnote 2); DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 271–2; *Finnar* also feast on butter in *Ketils saga Hængs*, ch. 3 (*Fornaldar sögur Norðurlanda* II, ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 159); Cardew, '*Mannfögnuður er oss at smjöri þessu*', pp. 150–1; it is conceivable that the name *Finnar* itself, perhaps related to the verb *finna* (to find) reflects the perception other Scandinavians had that the *Finnar* were hunter-gatherers, Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, pp. 116–7; Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 100; a discussion of the *Skræling* attitude to metal will feature in the next chapter of this thesis.

texts, albeit in slightly different ways. The first point is a total ignorance of 'civilized' agriculture: they live in a land of unparalleled agricultural and viticultural promise but do not have the sophistication or work ethic to take advantage of it.[57] Secondly, there is a lack of familiarity with a 'barbaric' lifestyle dependent on animal husbandry, demonstrated by their unfamiliarity with cattle and dairy products. They are, therefore, in terms of diet, decidedly 'savage', and make the 'barbaric' Icelanders look 'civilized' by comparison.

Is it justifiable to suggest that the authors of the sagas saw things in this way, and tailored their depiction to make this point about their relative sophistication? A survey of these concepts in other texts which educated Icelanders had or may have had access to suggests that it is possible. An association between diet and the level of civilization of a society is made in *Rómverja saga*, the Old Icelandic translation of Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum* and *De coniuratione Catilinae* and Lucan's *Pharsalia*. *Rómverja saga* was available in at least two Old Icelandic copies in the early thirteenth century when the Vínland sagas were probably written, and presumably the Latin texts of Sallust and Lucan were available there as well.[58] The first part of the work, based on *Bellum Jugurthinum*, describes a war between the Romans and the Numidians in the late second century BC, and includes descriptions of the lifestyles of the various societies that the Romans came into contact with in North Africa.

These societies are of two types, the 'savage' Gaetulians and Libyans who are described as the first inhabitants of Africa, and the 'barbaric' Numidians who are later arrivals. The Gaetulians and Libyans 'fædduz vid dyra holld' in the more abbreviated of the two Old Icelandic versions.[59] However, the Latin text on which the longer of the Old Icelandic versions appears to be based goes into more detail: 'Africam initio habuere Gaetuli et Libyes, asperi incultique, quis cibus erat caro ferina atque humi pabulum uti pecoribus'.[60] Unfortunately the Old Icelandic text which follows the Latin more closely, AM 595, is missing its first few chapters, so though we can assume that this phrase was known in Iceland in its entirety, we cannot confirm it. On this basis, however, a couple

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[57] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 170.
[58] Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, ed., *Rómverja saga*, p. cxcv; Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas I*, pp. 1 and 19; see discussion on dating of the Vínland sagas in Introduction.
[59] 'Ate the flesh of animals', *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 7 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 19).
[60] 'Originally, Africa was occupied by the Gaetulians and Libyans, savage and uncultivated people, whose diet was the flesh of wild beasts and fodder from the ground, like livestock', *Bellum Jugurthinum*, ch. 18 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 60).

of observations can be made about the ideas the Icelanders would have got from Sallust about the implications of a society's diet.

Inculti is itself a demonstration of a wider association between civilization and agriculture, meaning in Latin as in English 'uncultivated' in both senses, while *pabulum*, translated as 'fodder', is usually used for the food of livestock. In case the point was not already sufficiently obvious, Sallust spells it out by adding *uti pecoribus*, which can be translated 'like livestock'. The implications for an Icelandic audience would have been strangely immediate for a society on the other side of Europe and over a thousand years later: living off hunting and gathering food is animal-like and the mark of an 'uncultivated' society. It is surely not a coincidence that in *Rómverja saga* the equivalent of *uti pecoribus*, 'lifdu sem eínn fenadr' is moved from the description of the Gaetulian diet to their lack of housing instead. The Icelanders may have lived on a similar diet, but they could still claim to be more civilized when it came to building permanent houses.[61]

The Gaetulians and Libyans are represented throughout Sallust's text as savages, but the main foes of the Romans, the Numidians, are more civilized, though still barbarians. This is reflected also in the way Sallust describes their diet:

> Id ibique et in omni Africa, quae procul a mari incultius agebat, eo facilius tolerabatur quia Numidae plerumque lacte et ferina carne uescebantur et neque salem neque alia inritamenta gulae quaerebant: cibus illis aduorsum famem atque sitim, non lubidini neque luxuriae erat.[62]

> This [shortage of water] was there, and in all the parts of Africa which are far from the sea and uncultivated, more easily endured, since milk and the meat of wild animals is eaten by most Numidians, and they ask neither for salt, nor other flavour enhancements. Their diet opposes hunger and thirst, not pleasure or luxury.

The more complete text of *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, renders this statement almost word for word, though it omits any equivalent for *incultius*. Like the Gaetulians the Numidians are partly dependent on wild game, but they also herd livestock of some kind

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[61] 'Lived like beasts', *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 7 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 19); a discussion of housing will follow in the next chapter.
[62] *Bellum Jugurthinum*, ch. 89 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 156).

for the production of milk. This causes problems for a Roman army which is accustomed to living off bread when it runs out of grain, because 'Numidae pabulo pecoris magis quam aruo student' — or, in AM 595 — 'Numide rækia æigi miag iarðar auaxt', and there is no grain available to appropriate.[63] In fact Sallust contradicts himself elsewhere in the text when he writes that 'frumentum et alia quae usui forent adfatim praebita', suggesting that in parts of Numidia at least there was ample grain to be had, but also implying that mentioning this in the description of the Numidian diet would not have suited his representation of this people.[64] The implications of these extracts are simple, and would have been so to medieval Icelandic eyes also: the barbaric Numidians keep livestock and drink milk, but they do not grow grain like the civilized Romans. Thus the three levels of society — savagery, barbarism, and civilization — are laid out clearly with respect to their diets in a text which was sufficiently well known in medieval Iceland to have been translated into Old Icelandic.

It is the same demarcation which the Vínland sagas reveal. The savage *Skrælingar* have a diet of wild game (and presumably gathering other types of food, though this is not made explicit in either saga), and the Icelanders subsist on a combination of hunting and gathering and pastoralism. This would make them barbarians, except that they aspire to a civilized diet based on bread, and supplemented with wine, the ultimate Roman symbol of sophistication. Their desire to embrace the civilization that is associated with bread is demonstrated by their eager observation of self-sown wheat growing in Vínland, and by the feast that Eiríkr is said to hold when Karlsefni makes his supplies of flour, malt, and grain available to him, which is 'in sœmiligsta, svá at menn þóttusk trautt þvílíka rausn sét hafa í fátœku landi.'[65]

Although by Roman standards the Icelanders are barbarians, it is made so clear in these two sagas that this is from necessity and not from choice, that one might suspect the authors are seeking to challenge precisely these views about their society. This case is made more emphatic by the deliberate and mocking way in which the *Skrælingar* are

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[63] 'The Numidians occupy themselves more with fodder for livestock than with agriculture', *Bellum Jugurthinum*, ch. 90 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 158); 'the Numidians pay little attention to the produce of the earth', *Rómverja saga*, ch. 26 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 124).

[64] 'Grain and other things which were needed were amply provided', Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 54.6 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 110); cf. *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 12, 'menn fluttu að þeim sialfkrafa hvæití ok annað það er þæir þurftu' ('men conveyed to them voluntarily wheat and the other things which they needed'), an act less voluntary then the phrase suggests, since this forced generosity was the result of a campaign of terror by the Romans (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 69).

[65] 'The most becoming, such that the people thought it the most magnificent of its kind they had seen in that land of poverty', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 7 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 220).

portrayed in terms of their unfamiliarity with livestock and milk. The exaggeration extends to the failure of the *Skrælingar* to cultivate crops, for though the Numidians can in some regions blame the natural environment of their homeland for this lapse, mostly it seems to be attributed to their laziness or lack of sophistication; the fertile land of the *Skrælingar* certainly offers no such excuses.

Is it reasonable, however, to think that the medieval Icelanders would have been sufficiently concerned with Roman definitions of civilization that they would write their own stories with these ideas in mind? As discussed, the existence of *Rómverja saga* at all, and the presence of Sallust's works in Iceland, as well as their repetition of Sallust's assertion that only the worst savages are ignorant of the Romans, suggests that they did care about Roman ideas.[66] And they may have had more immediate reasons to do so when one considers the representation of Icelanders in contemporary medieval works.

It is worth revisiting Adam of Bremen, whose comments on Iceland in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* were quoted in the introduction:

> Est autem insula permaxima, ita ut populos infra se multos contineat, qui solo pecorum fetu vivunt eorumque vellere teguntur; nullae ibi fruges, minima lignorum copia. Propterea in subterraneis habitant speluncis, communi tecto [et victu] et strato gaudentes cum pecoribus suis. Itaque in simplicitate sancta vitam peragentes, cum nihil amplius quaerant quam natura concedit, laeti possunt dicere cum apostolo, 'habentes victum et vestitum, his contenti simus.'[67]
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> However this island is so large that it sustains on it many people, who live only on the offspring of their livestock and are clothed in their fleeces; no crops are there, and a meagre supply of wood. Therefore they live in underground caves, rejoicing in sharing shelter, nourishment and bed with their beasts. And so living to the end in holy simplicity, and asking nothing more than nature gives,

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[66] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 80.1 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 140); *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 22 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 106–7); see introductory section on Classical Learning.
[67] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 36 (ed. Schmeidler, p. 272).

> they are able to say joyfully with the apostle, 'having food and clothing, let us be happy.'

Like many medieval historians all over Europe, Adam knew and used Sallust in his works, and one can see echoes of Sallust's ideas here too.[68] However, where Sallust notes and appears to admire the simplicity of the Numidian diet for its asceticism, a way of being which was celebrated, if not often adhered to, in the Roman Republic, Adam of Bremen puts the Icelandic lifestyle into a Christian context. For this he praises it, but the praise is double-edged. It seems unlikely that many Icelanders, their reputations already suffering from their widely reported love of mutton sausages, would be flattered to have their lifestyle portrayed thus. Living off and indeed with their sheep and cattle, and sharing their food, may be cause for praise in a religious context, but it is otherwise a damning indictment of Icelandic barbarism.[69] Several similarities between ideas in the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* and in the Vínland sagas, especially in *Eiríks saga*, suggest either that these ideas were widely held, or that the author was familiar with Adam of Bremen's work. Adam is the first known author to name and describe *Winland*, and claims that he has it on good authority from the Danes that 'ibi vites sponte nascantur, vinum optimum ferentes. Nam et fruges ibi non seminatas habundare'.[70] Adam of Bremen also claims that various humanoid monsters inhabit the frozen wastelands to the north and east of Sweden, including 'Ymantopodes, uno pede salientes', like the monopod in *Eiríks saga*.[71] These creatures are described in several earlier ethnological works including Solinus and Isidore, but are usually located in the African interior where their one huge foot protects them from the sun when they lie on

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[68] Tschan, *Adam of Bremen*, p. xxxi.
[69] Hastrup, *Nature and Policy*, p. 31.
[70] 'There vines grow of their own accord, producing good wine. And also unsown crops abound there', *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 39 (ed. Schmeidler, p. 275); Jones, *Norse Atlantic Saga*, p. 123; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', p. 89.
[71] 'Ymantopodes, leaping on one foot', *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 25 (ed. Schmeidler, p. 257).

their backs.[72] Adam and the author of *Eiríks saga* however imagine them in the frozen north, hopping swiftly over ice and snow.[73]

It seems therefore likely that the author of *Eiríks saga rauða* was familiar with Adam's writing; there is some evidence that the author of *Íslendingabók* used the *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, and there is an Icelandic synopsis of his account of the conversion of Denmark. [74] This, however, can only be dated back as far as AM 415 4to, composed around 1310, and therefore approximately a century after the earliest possible dates for the composition of the Vínland sagas.[75] There may or may not have been copies of Adam of Bremen's work available in Iceland at the time when the Vínland sagas were written, but if his ideas about standards of living in Iceland were in circulation among the educated people of northern Europe then it is reasonable to expect to see an indignant or defensive reaction to them in Icelandic writings. It is likely that thin-skinned Icelanders may have sought to dispel myths about their habits and aspirations, including those of diet, in their own writings. The Vínland sagas do this with the double tactic of asserting the sophistication of their own people while simultaneously mocking the relationship to food of an even simpler and more barbaric society. In this context of defending Icelandic society against disparaging continental attitudes it is noteworthy that the German character Tyrkir in *Grænlendinga saga* is portrayed as having a barbaric attitude to alcohol when he wanders off, finds wild (and evidently self-

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[72] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 179.

[73] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 231–2); Jones, *Norse Atlantic Saga*, p. 285, and Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 179, suggest that the saga author imagines a uniped in the *Vínland* region because *Vínland* was thought to be a northerly extension of Africa, which would eliminate the need for inspiration from Adam of Bremen. However, as the African unipeds are clearly made thus for protection against the sun, it seems likely that the 'northern unipeds' in Adam of Bremen and *Eiríks saga* are directly related to each other and not independent adaptations of an older theme, such as that of Isidore of Seville. If the saga author were inspired by an earlier source such as Isidore rather than Adam then there would less climate-specific monsters that the saga author could have chosen. Of course, Adam made that leap of logic when he placed unipeds in the north, so in theory another author could have done the same independently — but Adam also placed just about every other monster he had read about in earlier ethnologies in the north, while the author of *Eiríks saga* just chooses the one; Barraclough, 'Travel', p. 212; Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 111–3.

[74] Tschan, *Adam of Bremen*, p. xviii; Jakob Benediktsson, ed., *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, pp. xxiv–v; *Íslendingabók* clearly does not, however, use Adam as a source for its section on *Vínland*, so if Adam's version and the Vínland sagas are related it is directly, or at least, not through *Íslendingabók*; the *Hungrvaka*, a collection of bishops' sagas written in the early thirteenth century, may have been influenced either directly or indirectly by Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, pp. 202–4; Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 308–12.

[75] *Handrit.is*, 'AM 415 4to', http://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0415 (viewed 22 March, 2016); Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *Complete Sagas of Icelanders I*, pp. 1 and 19.

fermented) grapes, and proceeds to get either insensibly drunk or irrationally excited, whereas the Icelanders take a more measured approach.[76]

These same associations between diet and level of civilization can be found in other texts both classical and medieval, some of which at least are likely to have been known in Iceland or encountered abroad by traveling Icelanders.[77] In his *Bellum Gallicum* Caesar comments that most Britons 'frumenta non serunt, sed lacte et carne vivunt', again making an explicit point about the failure of the barbaric Britons to grow arable crops, and the central role that milk and meat take in their diets as a result.[78] Of the Germans he writes that 'agri culturae non student, maiorque pars eorum victus in lacte, caseo, carne consitit'.[79] Caesar was widely known in medieval Europe, and would likely have been known to the most educated of Icelanders, at least in the short extracts used in schools for teaching. From a comparative point of view Caesar's text is also interesting, for his claim about the diet of the Britons is untrue, and indeed contradicts his own statement in a later chapter that when British tribes submitted to him he demanded hostages 'frumentumque exercitui', which they subsequently provide.[80] The environmental archaeological evidence demonstrates that while some communities may have depended mainly on livestock, grain had been grown across much of Britain since at least the late Bronze Age. In fact by the time Caesar invaded, Britain may have been exporting grain to the continent.[81] Ignoring this fact allows Caesar to avoid accusations about any mercenary reasons he may have had for invading Britain (when Rome was always in need of cheap grain imports), and it also depicts his opponents there as being far less civilized than the reality, the same strategy of barbarizing that Gerald, Adam, and the Icelanders use.

Tacitus was not known directly, but echoes of his work were transmitted through the writings of various medieval scholars and ended up in the writing of Adam of Bremen.[82] Tacitus claims that the early Germans valued themselves by the number of cattle they owned, lived on 'cibi simplices, agrestia poma, recens fera aut lac concretum', despite

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[76] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 252); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 176.
[77] Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss on the cultural significance of cooked versus raw food as symbolic of nature and culture respectively in societies around the world, *Raw and the Cooked*, pp. 334–9; cf. Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, p. 162.
[78] 'Do not sow corn, but live on milk and flesh', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.14 (ed. Seel, p. 138).
[79] 'They do not strive towards agriculture, and the greater part of their diet consists of milk, cheese and meat', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 6.22 (ed. Seel, p. 190).
[80] 'And grain for the army', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.20 (ed. Seel, p. 142).
[81] Harding, *Iron Age Hillforts*, p. 281; Harding, *Iron Age in Northern Britain*, p. 11.
[82] Harris, *Race and Ethnicity*, p. 23; Smalley, 'Sallust in the Middle Ages', p. 172.

having soil that is 'satis ferax', and had a weakness for alcohol, with little self-control in that regard.[83] Once again the dependency of an uncivilized society on meat and milk, as well as wild fruit, is emphasized, and when he does admit to them undertaking a little agriculture it is represented as a lazy effort where they change the land they are using every year rather than recultivate it.[84] The assertion that the Germans had a weakness for alcohol is noteworthy in the context of *Grœnlendinga saga*, considering the episode with Tyrkir discussed above. Wine is of course a symbol of sophistication; however, drinking it to excess suggests barbarian unfamiliarity with the product as well as lack of self-control. It is not sufficient to recognize wine to be considered civilized; one must also be able to stay sober.

In Gerald of Wales' description of Ireland the same accusations of laziness and wasted land are made more pointedly, as they are too by Anglo-Norman writers of the same period.[85] Although it contradicts some of his own stories involving the Irish planting wheat, rye and oats, he claims that the Irish 'live on beasts only, and live like beasts […] they have not progressed at all from the primitive habits of pastoral living'. Though the soil is rich there are no farmers, and the people are too lazy to plant good trees or mine minerals.[86] He is more generous, as one might expect, to the Welsh, conceding that though they use most of their land as pasture, they do also practice some ploughing and sowing of seed.[87] As discussed in the opening paragraph of this chapter, however, even this concession to a people he essentially regarded as barbaric falls short of the truth that the Welsh were practicing agriculture fairly widely by Gerald's time.

Through all these texts — the Vínland sagas written by Icelanders, works definitely known to them like Sallust, others probably known like Adam of Bremen and Caesar, and some less likely to be familiar such as Gerald of Wales and Tacitus — runs a common theme linking civilization and diet.[88] There is every reason to think that the medieval Icelanders were sufficiently educated in the European and Classical tradition to

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[83] 'Simple food, wild fruit, fresh game, or curdled milk'; 'fertile for sowing', Tacitus, *Germania* 5, 23 (ed. Städele, pp. 82 and 106).
[84] Tacitus, *Germania* 26 (ed. Städele, p. 108).
[85] Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales*, pp. 159–60; Scott and Martin, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, pp. xxvii–viii.
[86] Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland* (trans. O'Meara, pp. 72–4 and 85–6).
[87] Gerald of Wales, *Journey through Wales; The Description of Wales* (trans. Thorpe, p. 252); Scott and Martin, *Expugnatio Hibernica*, pp. xxx–i.
[88] Gerald of Wales may not have been known directly, but evidence that there was contact between Insular and Scandinavian writers in the twelfth century is suggested by similarities between his writing and the *Historia Norwegie*; Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, p. 174; White, *Non-Native Sources*, p. 48.

share in this long-standing conception about the diets of societies at different levels of development.[89] It can therefore also be accepted that they would have wished to include themselves among the more civilized peoples of Europe, and would have presented themselves accordingly in texts involving interaction with other societies. In *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Grœnlendinga saga* the interest of the Norse protagonists in food and agricultural potential is contrasted with the apparent obliviousness of the *Skrælingar* to the bountiful land which they inhabit and their unfamiliarity with dairy products and domestic livestock. This is not an original Icelandic idea; it is the furthest extension of an ancient and European-wide literary trope, and reveals the Icelanders to be engaging with and contributing to a literary and ethnographic tradition of which they are only a small part.

[89] See Introduction in this thesis; Würth, 'Historiography and Pseudo-History', pp. 156, 160–1, and especially 163–9; O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 61.

CHAPTER TWO: MATERIAL CULTURE

As with food, a society's relationship to material goods says much about the way that culture functions as well as what it values. The way in which a society depicts the material culture of a neighbouring society is therefore heavily loaded, as every assertion brings with it cultural implications that affect the way the 'other' society is viewed. Descriptions of clothing, housing, weapons and other material possessions can be used to emphasize similarities or differences between cultures, depending on the agenda and bias of the author. In general emphasizing the scale and use of more prestigious raw materials in one's own material culture is contrasted against descriptions of 'less civilized' societies that emphasize their use of more primitive materials with less technologically advanced results.[1]

Clothing

In the *Íslendingasögur* clothing is often used in descriptions of characters and is closely tied up with social status. Expensive *skarlatsskikkjur* ('scarlet cloaks') are given to Icelanders by foreign kings and rulers as rewards for services rendered that range from composing poetry to fighting battles. These cloaks are proudly worn by the Icelanders in later life back in Iceland, where the prestige attached to the material and craftmanship in the goods, as well as the status accorded a gift from a king, earns them attention and respect. One example from *Njáls saga* which demonstrates this point well is the gifts given to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi while abroad, and his return to Iceland and meeting with Hallgerðr Hǫskuldsdóttir. They appear to be attracted to each other initially because of the beautiful and high-status clothing each is wearing when they meet at the *Alþing*:

> Gunnarr gaf konungi langskip gott ok annat fé mikit. Konungr gaf honum tignarklæði sín ok glófa gullfjallaða ok skarband, ok gullknútar á, ok hatt gerzkan […] At jólum gaf jarl honum gullhring […]
>
> Gunnarr reið, ok þeir allir, til þings. En er þeir kómu á þing, þá váru þeir svá vel búnir, at engir váru þeir þar, at jafnvel væri búnir, ok fóru menn út ór hverri búð at undrask þá […] þá sá hann konur ganga í móti sér ok váru vel búnar. Sú

[1] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 181–2.

> var í ferðarbroddi konan, er bezt var búin. En er þau fundusk, kvaddi hon þegar Gunnar. Hann tók vel kveðju hennar ok spurði, hvat kvenna hon væri […] Hon var svá búin at hon var í rauðum kyrtli, ok var á búningr mikill; hon hafði yfir sér skarlatsskikkju, ok var búin hlǫðum í skaut niðr; hárit tók ofan á bringu henni ok var bæði mikit ok fagrt. Gunnarr var í tignarklæðum þeim, er Haraldr konungr Gormsson gaf honum; hann hafði ok hringinn á hendi, Hákonarnaut.[2]
>
> Gunnarr gave the king a good longship and much other treasure. The king gave him his own princely robes and gold-embroidered gloves and a headband with gold knots in it, and a Russian hat […] At Yule the jarl gave him a gold ring […]
>
> Gunnarr rode with all his companions to the *þing*. And when they came to the *þing* then were they so well-dressed that there were none there who were dressed so well and men came out of each booth to admire them […] Then he saw women walking towards him who were well-dressed. The foremost woman was the best-dressed, and when they met she greeted Gunnarr. He took her greeting well and asked who she was […] She was dressed thus, in a red tunic with many ornaments on it. She had over her a scarlet cloak decorated with lace on the lower part. Her hair lay over her chest and was thick and beautiful. Gunnarr was in the princely robes which King Haraldr Gormsson gave him. He also wore on his hand the ring Hákon's Gift.

Another equivalent example of the significance of valuable clothing gifts comes from *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, where Gunnlaugr is given a cloak and later a sword by King Aðalráðr of England that play a role in key moments later in the saga. The saga tells that 'konungr þakkaði honum kvæðit ok gaf honum at bragarlaunum skarlatsskikkju skinndregna inum beztum skinnum ok hlaðbúna í skaut niðr.'[3] When he subsequently meets his former fiancée Helga (now married to a rival poet), he is dressed in 'klæðin þau in góðu, er Sigtryggr konungr gaf honum', and gives her the magnificent cloak given to him by Aðalráðr. 'Hon þakkaði honum vel gjǫfina', and in the final scene of the story

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[2] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 31, 33 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 82–3 and 85).
[3] 'The king thanked him for the poem and gave him as a gift for the poem a scarlet cloak lined with the finest fur and ornamented with lace on the lower part', *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 7 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 71 and 73).

asks for it to be brought to her so she can die with it before her.[4] The sword Gunnlaugr was given by Aðalráðr also plays a part towards the end of the saga, for it is the weapon Gunnlaugr uses in his final, fatal duel with Hrafn, and it appears to be partly because of the quality of the sword that Gunnlaugr overcomes Hrafn.[5]

Clothing and accessories such as rings and swords from royal courts in Britain and Scandinavia are, therefore, portrayed as having high cultural status.[6] The origin of these goods may be as important or more important than their craftmanship and the materials used. If, as was suggested in the previous chapter, the medieval Icelanders saw the world in terms of an ordered scale of civilization, then the high status accorded to gifts from Scandinavian and British courts implies that these were considered to be higher on the scale than Icelandic society.[7] On the other hand, as with wheat and wine, the fact that the Icelanders recognize the value of these artifacts and treasure them, even if they do not have the resources to produce them in Iceland, shows them aspiring to align themselves with this upper end of the scale.

This is borne out by the eagerness of young Icelanders to win recognition at foreign courts as a way of enhancing their social status at home.[8] It also dictates the way in which the *Íslendingasögur* portray the acceptance of Icelanders by foreign rulers. Although 'bad' rulers such as Jarl Hákon are liable to abuse or mistreat Icelanders, 'good' rulers such as Óláfr Tryggvason instinctively recognize their exceptional qualities and quickly raise them to high rank within their courts.[9] Episodes in *Laxdæla saga*, *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*, *Egils saga* and others, as well as those quoted above and others from *Njáls saga* describe young Icelanders making a remarkable impression on foreign kings and outclassing all the native men of the country they have arrived in.[10] It seems that in their social dealings with foreigners as well as with regard to diet and material culture,

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[4] 'The fine clothes which King Sigtryggr gave him'; 'she thanked him sincerely for the gift', *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 11 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 89–91).
[5] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, chs. 12–3 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 102–3 and 107).
[6] However, a suspicion of decadence may have been picked up from continental and Classical works; in *Alexanders saga* the king of the *Serkir*, Darius, imagines a captured Alexander 'klęddan pellzklęðom eptir þeim sið sem er íBabilone' ('dressed in *pells-klæði* ('fine (purple) clothing of expensive material') as is the custom in Babylon'), a description which highlights the luxury of Alexander's clothing whilst simultaneously deriding its exoticism, ch. 30 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 31).
[7] Cf. Svanberg, *Decolonizing the Viking Age*, pp. 19–20.
[8] Glørstad, 'Homeland', pp. 167–8.
[9] *Brennu–Njáls saga*, compare chs. 86 and 89 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 206–8 and 220–4); *Grettis saga*, compare chs. 23–4 and 39 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 81–7 and 132–4); *Egils saga*, compare chs. 44–5, 49 and 50 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 107–14, 123–7 and 127–9); Hines, 'Kingship in *Egils saga*', pp. 25–6; Cook, 'Journeys to Norway', p. 130; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 80–2 and 101–7; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', pp. 5–7; Clunies Ross, 'From Iceland to Norway', pp. 55–7.
[10] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 113–20.

the medieval Icelanders wanted to imagine their ancestors as culturally and socially equal or superior to their Germanic-speaking neighbours in western Europe.

Emphasizing the barbarity of the clothing worn by other neighbouring people would have established the lower limits of the cultural range and placed Icelanders firmly in the cultured half, so it is a surprise to find that there is only one definite description of barbarian clothing in the *Íslendingasögur*.[11] Nothing specific is said of the clothing worn by people encountered in *Írland* or *Skotland* in any of the sagas; indeed, the only references to clothing in relation to *Írland* are a sample of *black* cloth lying beneath two gold rings and a fine sword in an underground house in *Flóamanna saga*, and the characterization of Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga* as being well-suited to the fine clothing Hǫskuldr provides for her.[12]

Instead one has to travel to Vínland to find barbaric clothing, worn by the *skozkr* slaves Haki and Hekja, and by implication the *Skrælingar* too. Haki and Hekja are barbaric in a number of ways, including most obviously their clothing, which is described thus:

> Þau hǫfðu þat klæði, er þau kǫlluðu kjafal; þat var svá gǫrt, at hǫttr var á upp ok opit at hliðunum ok engar ermar á ok kneppt saman milli fóta með knappi ok nezlu, en ber váru þau annars staðar.[13]

> They had that garment which they called *kjafal*; it was constructed thus; a hood was at the top and it was open at the sides, with no arms on it and fastened together between the legs with a toggle and loop, and they were naked everywhere else.

The material is not specified, so it is probably fair to assume the *kjafal* is made of wool, like most Icelandic clothing of the time; what is unusual about the garment is the design and the name *kjafal*, both of which were evidently unfamiliar to Icelanders at the time the saga was written and are suggestive of their Otherness. It is also striking how little of Haki and Hekja's bodies the *kjafal* covers. Their arms, their legs, and the sides of their

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[11] Of the clothing of a *finnskr* seeress in *Vatnsdæla saga* is said only that she was *búit* […] *vegliga* ('dressed magnificently'), ch. 10 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 29).
[12] *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16 (ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 262); *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 12 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 24–5).
[13] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).

torsos are all exposed, though their *kjafal* does have a hood, as if to partially hide their most human feature, their faces.[14] The social inferiority suggested by their partial nakedness is obvious, as is the other implication of their primitive clothing: their inhuman hardiness. By this time the pair have been living in northern Norway and Greenland for some years, presumably always dressed in the same inadequate style, and yet apparently thriving.

Such an unlikely ability to survive the cold suggests that these two *Skotar* are being characterized as being more like animals than humans. Part of their attraction as slaves, making them fit to be a royal gift to a favoured follower, is evidently their barbaric exoticism. Their other chief attribute of speed, which has associations with flight, is also suggestive of their animal-like nature, a comparison which is made explicit in the comment that 'þau váru dýrum skjótari', and a theme which will be revisited in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis.[15]

The *kjafal* does appear elsewhere in the sagas, though not under that name, and in a context which confirms its low status. The *kolbitr* Kolfinnr in *Kjalnesinga saga* wears 'kollhettu ok hafði kneppt blöðum milli fóta sér; hann hafði hökulbrækr ok kálfskinnskó loðna á fótum', when he goes courting. He is the subject of ridicule from his neighbours as a result, but refuses to let his mother provide any 'klæði sæmilig' for him instead. He is described as 'hitt óhræsi, er þar sitr ok hlýðir til tals manna' by a rival suitor, as if his clothing and appearance make him an animal. After killing his rival he evolves as a character, and then accepts proper clothes from his uncle, as if through this act he has become human and earned a man's clothing and weapons.[16] Another *kolbitr*, Refr in *Króka-Refs saga*, goes through a very similar episode and is also rewarded with 'góð klæði', though what he was wearing before is not mentioned, and the *kolbitr*, Gunnarr of Keldugnúp, is also urged to dress properly to go to some games with his brother 'því að veðrið var kalt', but refuses.[17] The obvious difference between these three and the slaves is that despite their unpromising beginning they are able to become 'civilized' and be

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[14] Cf. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 8–10, and discussion of Otherness in Introduction to this thesis.
[15] 'They were faster than deer', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).
[16] 'Coal-eater'; 'a round cap and had fastened his cloak-bottom between his legs; he had 'cloak-breeches' and shaggy calfskin shoes on his feet'; 'fitting clothing'; 'a filthy thing, who sits there and listens to the talk of humans', *Kjalnesinga saga*, chs. 7–8 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 17–21).
[17] *Króka-Refs saga*, ch. 3 (*Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 122–6); 'because the weather was cold', *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, ch. 1 (*Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 344–5).

accepted by their peers, whereas Haki and Hekja's barbarism is portrayed as a more fundamental and immutable characteristic in its representation through their clothing.

Clothing similar in some respects to that of Haki and Hekja is described by Gerald of Wales in his *Topographia Hibernica*, where he writes that the Irish dress 'in a barbarous fashion', wearing small, tight-fitting hoods over the head and shoulders, with mantles below, but go naked into battle. However, though Gerald was probably known in Norway by the end of the twelfth century, there is no proof that his writing was available in Iceland.[18] Caesar's description of early German clothing also sounds fairly similar to what Haki and Hekja wear: 'pellibus aut parvis renonum tegimentis utuntur, magna corporis parte nuda'.[19] The construction of this final clause is, curiously, almost identical to the final clause of the description of Haki and Hekja, 'en ber váru þau annars staðar', with both clauses also being the final words of the description as a whole. Part of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* deals with the arrival of a small force on a strange shore (Britain) guarded by large numbers of hostile natives; it is not totally implausible that the author of *Eiríks saga rauða* could have turned to it as a model if the text, or short extracts from it in a collection of instructive texts, were available to him.

Similarly, in terms of design, Tacitus asserts that the early Germans dress in a cloak fastened with a pin or thorn, the rich wearing trousers beneath and the poor nothing else. He adds that the children grow up naked and in squalor, and that the women go about with their arms, shoulders, and part of their breasts uncovered.[20] The similarities of this view of barbarians to the description of Haki and Hekja are obvious; they can be summarized as strange clothing and extensive nakedness. Although, as I have emphasized, knowledge of Tacitus in medieval Europe was minimal, it is worth just pausing a moment to consider that in this same saga Freyðís uncovers one of her breasts and smacks it with a sword during a battle with the *Skrælingar*, causing the *Skrælingar* to flee. Tacitus describes German women baring their breasts when their men are losing a battle to remind them of the stakes involved, with the result that the tide of battle is then turned.[21] However, despite the temptation to make a direct link between the two, it is probable that each is the independent result of a shared classical tradition of the Amazon

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[18] Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland* (trans. O'Meara, p. 85); Turville-Petre, *Origins of Icelandic Literature*, p. 174; White, *Non-Native Sources*, p. 48.
[19] 'They use skins or small garments of animal hide, with the greater part of the body bare', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 6.21 (ed. Seel, p. 190).
[20] Tacitus, *Germania* 17, 20 (ed. Städele, pp. 98, 102).
[21] Tacitus, *Germania* 8 (ed. Städele, pp. 86–8); Lodewyckx, 'Freydís Eiríksdóttir rauða', pp. 185–6.

woman that was well known in medieval Europe; indeed, Amazons feature (with one breast uncovered) in *Alexanders saga*.[22]

The clothing of the *Skrælingar* is not described, but their use of skins for housing, boats and most significantly for sleeping sacks, as well as the abundance they have of furs to trade, associates them strongly with these animal-derived materials. Furthermore, when violence breaks out during the trading they 'fóru nú brott sem tíðast, en klæði þeira lágu þar eptir ok varningr.'[23] It is possible that the *Skrælingar* strip off their clothes so they can run faster, which would tie in with the theme of barbaric animal-like nakedness, but it seems more likely that the clothes referred to are among the trade goods, and therefore presumably made of furs or skins, or the Greenlanders would have limited interest in them.[24] They may even have been literally trading the clothes off their backs, as in the account of Jacques Cartier's encounter with Native American people in 1534:

> […] they had come to barter with us; and held up some skins of small value, with which they clothe themselves […] They bartered all they had to such an extent that all went back naked without anything on them;[25]

Dressing in animal furs or skins has associations with barbarians that date back at least to the Romans, and once again we find references in Tacitus. He asserts that the Germans living further from the Roman border wear furs, and describes the *Fenni* thus: 'fennis mira feritas, foeda paupertas: non arma, non equi, non penates; victui herba, vestitui pelles, cubile humus'.[26] Similarly in *Historia Norwegie*:

> Est igitur uastissima solitudo affinis Norwegie diuidens eam per longum a paganis gentibus. Que solummodo Finnis et bestiis incolitur, quarum carnibus semicrudis uescuntur et pellibus induuntur.

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[22] *Alexanders saga*, ch. 121 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 116); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 192–3; Wolf, 'Amazons in Vínland', pp. 482–5; alternatively, Kenneth Baitsholts claims that Freydís' behaviour is a historically valid representation of a Beothuk taboo against harming women, 'First European Accounts', p. 367.

[23] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11; 'went away at once, but their clothes and trade goods they left lying there', *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 228–31 and 261–3).

[24] Cf. Roesdahl, 'Walrus ivory and other northern luxuries', p. 145.

[25] Wallace, 'L'Anse aux Meadows', p. 126; Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 103.

[26] 'The *Fenni* are amazingly savage, and disgustingly poor: they have no weapons, no horses and no homes; they live on grass, wear skins and sleep on the ground.', Tacitus, *Germania* 17, 46 (ed. Städele, pp. 98 and 132).

> There is then a vast wilderness bordering Norway separating it along its length from pagan peoples. And only *Finni* and beasts live there, the flesh of which, half raw, they feed on, and the skins they wear.[27]

The *Fenni* are among both the remotest and the most savage of all the barbarians Tacitus describes, and as can be observed also with the Icelandic view of the *Skrælingar*, and in accordance with Other theory, these two features go together.[28]

Adam of Bremen describes the *Scritefini* ('Sliding' or 'Skiing Finns', the name itself suggesting fast movement) as running faster than wild beasts and wearing the pelts of wild beasts, which is reminiscent of the way the *menn skozka* Haki and Hekja are described in *Eiríks saga*, and indeed the *Skrælingar*.[29] The inclusion of an *einfætingr* in *Eiríks saga* is a good indicator that the author was educated in the wider Latin tradition of geographical writing, and therefore possibly familiar with Adam's writings.[30] The association of the *Skrælingar* with skins also matches closely the depiction of the *Finnar* in *Egils saga*, who trade and pay tribute in skins and furs.[31] Other *skozkr* characters such as *Eyrbyggja saga*'s Nagli appear to dress like the Icelanders (if Nagli doesn't it is not commented on), which suggests that the description of Haki and Hekja may owe more to learned foreign ethnographies than Icelandic traditions about *skozkr* clothing.[32] Further similarities with Adam's work can be found in a description of trading woollen garments for precious furs with the *Sembi* or *Pruzzi*, which brings to mind the eagerness of the *Skrælingar* to trade furs for ever smaller strips of red cloth, suggesting altogether that Adam of Bremen was indeed a source for *Eiríks saga*.[33] As with the trading of dairy products described in the previous chapter, the *Skrælingar* are depicted as recognizing the superiority of the Norse products, strips of cloth in this case. However, because of their gullibility and lack of civilization, they go to ridiculous lengths to get their hands on insignificant quantities of the cloth, making a mockery of their instinctive aspiration to become more civilized in the process.

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[27] *Historie Norwegie*, ch. 4 (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, p. 59); Zachrisson, 'South Saami Culture', p. 193.
[28] Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 15–6.
[29] *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, chs. 24, 32 (ed. Schmeidler, pp. 255 and 266).
[30] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 231–2).
[31] *Egils saga*, chs. 13–17 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 35–43).
[32] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 33–40).
[33] *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 18 (ed. Schmeidler, pp. 245–6); *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228).

The use of furs and skins as materials for clothing is also described by Caesar in terms of the Britons, who says that they 'pellibusque sunt vestiti', and by Gerald of Wales, who writes that in the more remote parts of Ireland the people wear skins or nothing, and eat only milk, meat and fish.[34] Although this association is compellingly consistent across the works of these various authors, a note of caution should be sounded here in recognition of the practical fact that societies which were not keeping sheep, or growing flax or hemp, would actually have been largely reliant on animal skins for clothing. The literary convention which marks these barbarians as such through their choice of clothing is therefore probably also, to a large extent, a statement of fact. This does not detract, however, from the meaning it is imbued with by the context in which these authors use it. In none of these examples is the wearing of skins a neutral observation, but in every case it is combined with other features aimed at creating an image of the Other which is primitive and animal-like, and even dirty and ridiculous.

Weaponry

Descriptions of weapons are used in much the same way, to highlight the otherness of peoples who are presented as barbarians in comparison to the Icelanders. In the *Íslendingasögur* the highest-status weapons, like clothing, are those given to characters by foreign kings and earls, as in *Laxdœla saga* when Óláfr gives his father-in-law Egill a sword he had been given by Mýrkjartan *konungr*. The sword is named 'Mýrkjartansnaut', which by its name makes everyone aware of Óláfr's special relationship with Mýrkjartan. Egill becomes 'allléttbrúnn við gjǫfina' when given the sword, showing that he also understands the significance of the gift and sees value in the association it has to the king.[35] In the more fantastical sagas weapons taken from burial mounds are also highly regarded, and the highest-quality weapons have status even when not given as gifts, including Skarpheðinn's axe *Rimmugýgi* in *Njáls saga*.[36] Icelanders in the sagas recognize quality in a weapon and know how to use them, and also have the necessary wealth to own swords and axes, weapons that require much more iron than lower-status spears and bows and arrows.

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[34] 'Are clothed in skins', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.14 (ed. Seel, p. 138); Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland* (trans. O'Meara, p. 95).
[35] 'Myrkjartan's gift'; 'extremely cheerful on account of the gift', *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 23 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 65–6).
[36] 'Battle-Ogress' *Njáls saga*, chs. 92, 120 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 233 and 304).

The best description of smithying is in *Egils saga*, where there is almost a ritualistic approach in the way Skallagrímr rows out alone at night to find the perfect smithy stone from the bottom of the fjord. Skallagrímr clearly derives status from his skill as a blacksmith, and even composes a verse about his ironworking.[37] The archaeological evidence for the period shows that Skallagrímr's use of bog-ore iron and large quantities of wood to make charcoal are realistic.[38] Unlike other materials such as timber and grain that they were accustomed to using in Norway, Britain and Ireland, bog-ore iron evidently was available in Iceland in reasonable quantities, and the narrative given in *Egils saga* is that within a very short period after arrival the settlers began taking advantage of this resource. Excavations at L'Anse aux Meadows support the likelihood of this account, as a hut containing a kiln and furnace for charcoal and iron production respectively have been found on the site.[39] The narrative in *Egils saga* of opportunistic exploitation is, once again, in contrast to the *Skrælingar* as they appear in the Vínland sagas, who appear to have access to all the resources they could wish for, but make use of hardly any.

The failure of the *Skrælingar* even to understand iron when they see it, never mind produce and work it themselves, is a feature of both Vínland sagas.[40] The parallels between these passages from *Grænlendinga saga* and then *Eiríks saga* are so close that these episodes in the sagas must have a common ancestor:

> Nú hafði einn þeira Skrælinga tekit upp øxi eina ok leit á um stund ok reiddi at félaga sínum ok hjó til hans; sá fell þegar dauðr. Þá tók sá inn mikli maðr við øxinni ok leit á um stund ok varp henni síðan á sjóinn, sem lengst mátti hann; en síðan flýja þeir á skóginn, svá hverr sem fara mátti, ok lýkr þar nú þeira viðskiptum.[41]
>
> Now had one of those *Skrælingar* picked up an axe and looked around for a while and swung it at his companion and struck him. He fell down dead at once. Then the large man picked up the axe and looked around for a while and then

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[37] *Egils saga*, ch. 30 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 78–9).
[38] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 48.
[39] Wallace, 'Norse in Newfoundland', p. 11.
[40] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 94–5.
[41] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 263–4).

> threw it into the sea, as far as he could. And afterwards they fled into the woods, each as he was able to go, and their battle ends now.
>
> Þeir Skrælingar fundu ok mann dauðan, ok lá øx í hjá. Einn þeira tók upp øxina ok høggr með tré ok þá hverr at ǫðrum, ok þótti þeim vera gersimi ok bíta vel. Síðan tók einn ok hjó í stein, svá at brotnaði øxin, ok þá þótti þeim engu nýt, er eigi stózk grjótit, ok kǫstuðu niðr.[42]
>
> Those *Skrælingar* found also a dead man, and his axe lay beside him. One of them picked up the axe and chopped at a tree and various other things, and they thought it a valuable thing and that it cut well. Then one took it and struck on rock, so that the axe broke, and then they thought it no use, since it could not withstand stone, and threw it down.

In both stories the *Skrælingar* find an iron axe and, being ignorant of its proper qualities and uses, experiment with it before ultimately deciding it is of little use to them and discarding it. The descriptions of the ignorant barbarians killing each other and destroying the axe on a rock are humorous at the expense of the *Skrælingar* and calculated to ridicule them.[43] As with the depictions of clothing, history and archaeology support the technical details of the passages, that the Native Americans had only limited experience of iron tools or weapons at that time. Gunnar Karlsson considers these examples to be transmitting 'a genuine idea of the culture of Stone Age hunters'; however, the way these passages are presented makes it clear that their main purpose is not to be an accurate historical record of the *Skrælingar*, but an entertaining caricature which emphasizes their barbarity, making them inferior to the Norsemen in every respect.[44]

The slightly forced caricature in the first passage, from *Grænlendinga saga*, is undermined by descriptions of trading earlier in the same chapter.[45] There it is written that the *Skrælingar*, for their skins and furs, 'vildu vápn helzt fyrir; en Karlsefni bannaði þeim at selja vápnin', and that the peaceful trading ends when one of the *Skrælingar* is

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[42] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 230).
[43] Baitsholts, 'First European Accounts', p. 366.
[44] Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, pp. 31–2; Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 181–3; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', pp. 94–5.
[45] Baitsholts, 'First European Accounts', p. 366.

killed because he 'hafði viljat taka vápn þeira'.[46] This description, that the *Skrælingar* instinctively recognized the value of the iron weapons and were eager to possess them, is far more realistic than the tale of one picking up an axe and hitting his friend with it to see what it does.[47] It is clear from the account of trading that they knew what iron weapons were for and could do; even if one of them wished to test it on a companion, having confirmed its purpose it would be senseless to then discard it. Throwing it into the sea makes the *Skrælingar*, even their impressive chieftain, look as if they think there is something magical and malicious about the axe, when to the Vikings it is just an ordinary everyday object.

Eiríks saga includes the same detail that 'þeir vildu ok kaupa sverð ok spjót, en þat bǫnnuðu þeir Karlsefni ok Snorri'.[48] Once again, this would imply that the *Skrælingar* knew perfectly well what iron swords and spears were for, and their value, as one might expect from a historical perspective too. Even if it were not totally absurd for an overenthusiastic *Skræling* to have tested an iron weapon on stone, as with *Grænlendinga saga*, this episode is included not for any dubious historical merit, but for its literary value, that is, for its entertainment value and for the way it negatively characterizes the *Skrælingar*.[49]

It is interesting that the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga* treat the axe as if it has magic properties which they are afraid of and feel unable to control, when their own weapons have the same effect on the Norsemen.[50] The *Skrælingar* use a large weapon, which sounds like a catapult of some kind, to hurl at their enemies what look like sheep's stomachs but which land with a great noise and terrify the Vikings.[51] At the same time a magical vision makes Karlsefni and his men think that another large party of *Skrælingar* are attacking them from the side, a detail which reinforces the idea that the catapult has a

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[46] 'Wanted most of all weapons for them, but Karlsefni forbade them to trade weapons'; 'had wanted to take their weapons', *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 262–3).

[47] The *Skrælingar* were probably familiar with meteoritic iron and accustomed to making small tools with it, so would in reality have grasped the usefulness and purpose of an axe immediately, Odess, Loring and Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', p. 200.

[48] 'They also wanted to buy swords and spears, but this was forbidden by Karlsefni and Snorri', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228).

[49] Williamsen suggests that the axe episodes define the Otherness of the *Skrælingar* in relation to their unfamiliarity with weapons, but I think it far more likely that it is their unfamiliarity with the material of the axe that the authors are emphasizing, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 467.

[50] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 95–6.

[51] Sverrir Jakobsson suggests that this catapult could be inspired by accounts of Chinese gunpowder technology, 'Vinland and Wishful Thinking', pp. 511–2.

supernatural element.[52] To a neutral observer the reaction of each people to the unknown military technology seems similar, but in the saga the fact that the catapult has magical associations justifies fearing the catapult, whereas the commonplace nature of the axe makes fearing it, especially in one's own hand, ridiculous.[53]

In battle the *Skrælingar* use bows and arrows, which also has implications for their portrayal. From a material perspective they are the tools of a society which has limited technological expertise or little access to metal ore, since they can be made without any metal. Where metal is available but in short supply, bows and arrows as well as spears, are the weapons of choice, a practical reality which is represented in a number of saga episodes set in Ireland. Icelanders rarely use bows and arrows, and though they carry spears, they are normally used only in the opening stages of a battle, instead favouring a sword, axe or *atgeirr* (commonly translated as 'halberd') for serious fighting, all of which require significantly more iron, and are therefore symbols of higher status and technological advancement.[54] Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi's use of a bow when under siege is a notable exception.[55] Bow use is associated with the *Finnar*, like the archer Finnr in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, who is a better marksman than any of the Norwegians against whom he is fighting, including the king.[56] This may suggest a cultural association between bows and, from an Icelandic point of view, less civilized peoples, though there may also have been a historical and practical truth in that the *Finnar* actually had superior bow-making technology compared with the rest of Scandinavia.[57]

From a literary perspective bows and arrows and spears share an important feature, that they have a greater range than swords or axes, and potentially than an *atgeirr* too, as the smaller blade of a spear would allow for a longer haft, and short-handled spears could be thrown. This makes them safer weapons to engage in battle with, and therefore, one might expect, the weapons most likely to be used by cowardly individuals or peoples. The way bows and arrows are used by the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga* matches

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[52] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 228–30); on the magical depiction of the catapult see DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 276; Lindow, 'Supernatural Others', p. 13; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', pp. 468–70; Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', pp. 240 and 250–4.

[53] Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 252.

[54] The way Gunnarr uses his *atgeirr* in battle, skewering opponents and tossing them into the air, shows that, whatever the precise details of its shape, it must have had a broad head, probably with more than one point, and a medium-length, solid shaft, making it a much more substantial weapon than a spear.

[55] *Njáls saga*, ch. 77 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 187–90).

[56] Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 100.

[57] *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 108 (*Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 362–3); DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the *Finnar*', p. 259; Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, pp. 120.

this expectation, as they surround the Greenlanders in small boats and shoot arrows at them from a distance before retreating again:

> Þorvaldr mælti þá: "Vér skulum fœra út á borð vígfleka ok verjask sem bezt, en vega lítt í mót." Svá gera þeir, en Skrælingar skutu á þá um stund, en flýja síðan í burt sem ákafast, hverr sem mátti. Þá spurði Þorvaldr menn sína, ef þeir væri nǫkkut sárir; þeir kváðusk eigi sárir vera.[58]

> Þorvaldr spoke then: "We shall fit the saxboards with a protective cover and protect ourselves as best we can, but fight back only little. They do so, and the *Skrælingar* shoot at them awhile, and then flee away with haste, each as he is able. Then Þorvaldr asked his men if they were wounded at all; they said they were not wounded.

Later on, however, the *Skrælingar* do seem to engage in close combat, though there are no details given about their weapons, or indeed how close the combat is, except that a large number of them are killed by the Greenlanders.[59] In *Eiríks saga rauða* the *Skrælingar* seem to engage in close combat, but the only details given about their use of weapons is the catapult mentioned above, and the line 'gengu þeir saman ok bǫrðusk. Varð þar skothríð hǫrð, því at Skrælingar hǫfðu valslǫngur', which introduces a new ranged weapon, the slingshot or hand catapult, which also has low-status associations.[60] The most obvious other user of a slingshot in battle in the *Íslendingasögur* is the soon-to-be-outlawed Búi, who as it happens is of *írskr* descent, in *Kjalnesinga saga*.[61]

A similar incident to the attack by the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga* befalls Óláfr Hǫskuldsson when he arrives in *Írland*, with his crew coming under attack on their ship as it lies stranded in shallow water just offshore. The Norsemen line the sides of the ship with their shields and protect themselves without attacking back:

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[58] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 256).
[59] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 263).
[60] 'There was then a hard shower of missiles, because the *Skrælingar* had slingshots', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228); see footnote 3 on same page for discussion of what is meant by *valslǫngur*.
[61] *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 3 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, p. 11); Búi's use of a sling probably echoes David and his fight with Goliath, though this biblical background is certainly not the association the *Skrælingar* use of slings has.

> Óláfr bað þá brjóta upp vápn sín ok fylkja á skipinu allt á millum stafna. Stóðu þeir ok svá þykkt, at allt var skarat með skjǫldum; stóð spjóts-oddr út hjá hverjum skjaldarsporði […] Opt hǫfðu Írar veitt þeim árásir með skotum, ok varð þeim Óláfi ekki mein at.[62]
>
> Óláfr commanded them to take out their weapons and draw up a battle line along the ship from stem to stern. They stood so tightly, that everything was covered by the shields; a spear point stuck out by the base of every shield […] Frequently the *Írar* had attacked them with missiles, and Óláfr's men were not harmed.

The similarity in weapon use and tactics with the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga* is striking, with the main difference being that the *Írar* do not flee when their attack fails, but keep trying until their king arrives to resolve the situation. This is a very low-risk strategy, and the reward in both cases is low, but so is the danger involved. It is a prudent strategy, but it would surely have seemed cowardly to a medieval Icelandic audience accustomed to tales of the heroic sword and axe fights of their own ancestors. It is worth noting that the Norsemen are also armed with spears, but if they are throwing spears then they resist the temptation to throw them, instead keeping them at hand in case of closer combat.

Long-shafted spears are also used in two encounters between Norse and native to threaten or kill the Icelandic characters with a minimum of danger to the attackers. One of these incidents is again similar to the two examples discussed, with Þórgeirr and his companions casting anchor a little way off the *írskr* coast and preparing to defend themselves:

> Síðan sjá þeir fjǫlmenni mikit á land upp ok mǫrg spjót, sem á skóg sæi. Þó at Írar hefði háskept spjót, þá tóku þau þó eigi til þeira. Nú halda þeir fé sínu ok fjǫrvi ok sigldu á brott, þá er þeim gaf byri.[63]

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[62] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 21 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 55–6).
[63] *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 159)

> Then they saw a great crowd up on the land and many spears, like a forest in appearance. Although the *Írar* had long-shafted spears, they were not however able to reach them. Now they held on to their wealth and lives and sailed away, when they got a fair wind.

The description 'like a forest' suggests that these spears are really quite long-shafted, and therefore inconvenient for single combat, but very dangerous in large numbers when their wielders can protect each other, as in a Greek phalanx. Once again, they allow for combat with a minimum of risk to any one individual, provided the group cooperates and they hold their nerve. An example of the threat posed by a group of warriors with long spears can be found in *Egils saga*, when Egill's brother Þórólfr is ambushed by a group of *Bretar* while fighting for Athelstan at Vínheiðr. 'Brugðu þegar mǫrgum kesjum senn á Þórólfi, ok fell hann þar við skóginum', having had no opportunity to defend himself or fight back against these tactics.[64] In *Njáls saga* Sigurðr *jarl* is shot through and killed by an *írskr* spear thrown at the battle of Clontarf.[65]

The wider implications of fighting in this manner will be assessed in more detail in the next chapter, which focuses on battles, but so far as the weapons themselves are concerned two main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, barbarians in the sagas mainly use lower-status weapons requiring very little iron compared to Norse weaponry. Secondly, they use them in a way which minimizes the danger to their own persons. The implications of these two statements are that these peoples are being portrayed as poor in resources and ignorant of how to use what they do have available, and as cowards who are afraid of danger and use their weapons accordingly. There are many other instances of battles between barbarians and Norsemen, as will be discussed, but in no family saga is it ever stated that one of the *Írar*, *Skotar*, or *Skrælingar* uses a sword, axe, or *atgeirr* in combat as the Icelanders do, and this is significant for their portrayal.

There are a few references in the classical Latin sources to the weapons used by barbarians in battles against Romans, some of them in strikingly similar situations. When Caesar describes his first landing in Britain his transports are too deep to be beached right up on the shore line, so his men have to disembark in deeper water and wade ashore in their heavy kit. Meanwhile the Britons, some on horses, are gathered on

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[64] 'Immediately Þórólfr was pierced by many spears simultaneously, and he died there by the woods', *Egils saga*, ch. 54 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 140).
[65] *Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 451).

the beach and in the shallower water, from where they hurl javelins at the Romans. As the legionaries slowly make their way ashore the enemy cavalry surrounds isolated groups and 'ab latere aperto in universos tela coniciebant', and they also come under missile fire from every side a few days later while harvesting grain.[66] This is reminiscent of the missile fire vikings come under when landing in Ireland, and also of the battle against the *Skrælingar* in *Eiríks saga rauða*, where the Norsemen, already suffering a heavy barrage of missiles, are attacked on their flank by a group of attackers they had not noticed before. As I suggested in the previous section, Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*, and especially the landing in Britain, has a number of themes, and possibly even a phrase in common with *Eiríks saga rauða*, and could have been referred to as a model by the author. The learned Saxo Grammaticus asserts that the *Finni* are 'acer iisdem telorum est usus. Non alia gens promptiore iaculandi peritia fruitur. Grandibus et latis sagittis dimicant', demonstrating that an association between 'barbaric' peoples and ranged weapons could be applied to a Nordic context by an author with a classical Latin background.[67]

Tacitus demonstrates that the material connection between the availability of iron to a people and the type of weapon they use was obvious to geographers and ethnologists a millennium before the *Íslendingasögur* were written, and it is of course such common sense to a society closely dependent on raw materials that the Icelanders must have taken it for granted. Tacitus wrote of Germany:

> Ne ferrum quidem superest, sicut ex genere telorum colligitur. rari gladiis aut maioribus lanceis utuntur; hastas vel ipsorum vocabulo frameas gerunt angusto et brevi ferro, sed ita acri et ad usum habili, ut eodem telo, prout ratio poscit, vel cominus vel eminus pugnent. et eques quidem scuto frameaque contentus est, pedites et missilia spargunt, pluraque singuli, atque in inmensum vibrant, nudi aut sagulo leves.[68]

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[66] 'At the exposed flanks of the masses they threw spears', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.26, 4.32 (ed. Seel, pp. 116–8 and 121).
[67] 'Vicious in the use of ranged weapons. No other people is quicker or possesses so much experience in javelin throwing. They fight with big and wide arrows', Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* V.xiii.1 (ed. Friis-Jensen, p. 350).
[68] Tacitus, *Germania* 6 (ed. Städele, p. 84).

> Indeed there is no excess of iron, as has been inferred from the type of weapons there. The use of swords or large spears is rare; they bear javelins, or in their own language *frameae*, with a narrow and short edge, but therefore so sharp and handy in use, that they fight with the same spear, just as the situation demands, in hand-to-hand and ranged fighting. And indeed the horsemen are content with a shield and a *framea*; the footsoldiers shower missiles down, many to each one, and hurl them a great distance, being naked or in light cloaks.

Tacitus adds later that the *Fenni* hunt with arrows 'quas inopia ferri ossibus asperant', a claim which is echoed by the episode in *Vatnsdæla saga* when three *Finnar* are paid for performing a supernatural journey to Iceland with butter and tin.[69] Considering that he was not known in medieval Iceland, and therefore not a possible model for the saga writers, the similarities in the depiction of Tacitus serves as a useful demonstration that there are practical reasons why the *Skrælingar* did in reality primarily use the weapons the Icelanders say they did, and as a result of that, why they fight they way they do.[70] Limited availability of iron means weapons will be small and light, and therefore best used in battle by throwing or shooting them from a distance. To describe the weapons and warfare of foreigners in these terms is not, therefore, necessarily an attempt to barbarize them by the Icelanders; it may well be faithful reporting.

However, it is certainly true that these 'facts' fit conveniently into the Icelandic idea of barbarians being poor and ignorant in material use, and applying what they do have and know to the crafting of more cowardly weapons. It is also a theme of barbarizing which Tacitus proves was in use already in the first century AD. When it comes to the *Írar*, the archaeological record shows there was extensive iron working during the early medieval period, which makes the Icelandic depiction of them seem rather more skewed than the depiction of the *Skrælingar*.[71] However, the *Írar* encountered outside urban centres would presumably have mostly been poorer than the Norsemen who encountered them, since travelling abroad in itself required a certain level of wealth. This means that in a

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[69] 'Which due to a lack of iron they tip with bone', Tacitus, *Germania* 46 (ed. Städele, p. 132); *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 12 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 34).
[70] Odess, Loring, and Fitzhugh point out that the Dorset and Thule people were familiar with meteoritic iron and used it to make small tools and blades when available, though they mostly used bone, ivory and stone for arrow heads ('*Skræling*', pp. 197, 200–1 and 203–4).
[71] O'Sullivan, McCormick, Kerr and Harney, *Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 218–27.

chance meeting the probability would have been that an Icelander would have been better and more expensively armed than an *írskr* man, who might well have had only a spear for arms. Accurate or not, the details about barbarian weapons given in the sagas suit the more general narrative of the Other, and this may be part of the reason why they are included in these sagas.

Housing

When it comes to housing, stereotypes that emphasize the simplicity, impermanence and squalor of the barbaric housing of the Other are common to both the *Íslendingasögur* and classical texts, and in both it is contrasted against the civilized habits of the primary culture. Adam of Bremen's comments on Icelandic living conditions are here relevant once again:

> Est autem insula permaxima, ita ut populos infra se multos contineat, qui solo pecorum fetu vivunt eorumque vellere teguntur; nullae ibi fruges, minima lignorum copia. Propterea in subterraneis habitant speluncis, communi tecto [et victu] et strato gaudentes cum pecoribus suis.[72]
>
> However this island is so large that it sustains on it many people, who live only on the offspring of their livestock and are clothed in their fleeces; no crops are there, and a meagre supply of wood. Therefore they live in underground caves, rejoicing in sharing shelter, nourishment and bed with their beasts.

If Adam's view represents a general Continental attitude towards Iceland, as argued in relation to diet, then accusations of cave-dwelling may have been encountered alongside nicknames like *mǫrlandar* by Icelanders abroad.[73] Cave-dwelling in the sagas is associated strongly with outlaws, as well as trolls and giants in the more fantastical passages, and would surely have been considered a serious insult by a medieval

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[72] Adam of Bremen, *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum IV*, ch. 36 (ed. Schmeidler, p. 272).
[73] 'Suet-eater'; see discussion in previous chapter. Sverrir Jakobsson suggests that Adam's view of cave-dwelling would have been considered a positive one by the Icelanders for its holy simplicity, but I see no reason to think that the Icelanders were as thrilled by the idea of cave-dwelling as Adam was, and the association of earth-houses with *Írar* and especially *Skrælingar*, which will be discussed shortly, to my mind confirms this; see 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 96–7.

Icelander.[74] Likewise the assertion that they shared 'nourishment and bed with their beasts'; although Adam goes on to praise the Icelanders for their holy simplicity it is hard to imagine that they would have identified, or wished to be identified, with this image.[75] In fact Adam's view was probably the result of ignorance or slander, while the depiction in the *Íslendingasögur* of great halls seems more like deliberate exaggeration.

In reality dedicated cattle byres were common across Iceland from the ninth through to the thirteenth century and even a marginal settlement could have separate dwellings for humans and livestock.[76] Larger farms might have two buildings for the household, a large *skáli* and a smaller *stofa*, both timber-lined with wood, either imported or driftwood — hardly the underground caves Adam imagines.[77] The idea of Icelanders living underground may, however, have been influenced by the fact that these buildings were commonly clad in turf and stones, and would therefore not have made quite the impression the halls described in the sagas make.[78] When abroad, even in regions with a plentiful supply of wood such as L'Anse Aux Meadows, this same construction of turf over a timber frame and a turf roof was used even for quite large halls.[79] The uninitiated, seeing these constructions from the outside, might well be excused for thinking the Icelanders lived underground, or at least in earth houses, so the creators of the sagas would have faced an uphill struggle if some of them saw their writing as an opportunity to shift this barbaric stereotype onto another people. This they do, as with clothing, through the dual strategy of emphasizing the quality of houses in Iceland, and by shifting the very characteristics that Adam links with Icelandic housing onto the houses of the more barbaric foreigners they meet abroad.

The houses of Icelanders, as portrayed in the sagas, are mostly wooden halls of substantial size, as a few examples from the relevant sagas demonstrate. When Óláfr Hǫskuldsson sets up his farm at Hjarðarholt he uses 'viðum, er þar váru hǫggnir i skóginum, en sumt hafði hann af rekastrǫndum' to build a 'risuligr' farmstead.[80] Even this is insufficient, however, for a man of his stature, so he travels to Norway to get timber for a magnificent *eldhús* before hosting a grand wedding there for his daughter:

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[74] Cf. *Grettis saga*, chs. 58–60 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 186–98), *Kjalnesinga saga*, chs. 4ff. (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 13ff).
[75] Cf. Lindow, 'Supernatural Others', p. 23.
[76] Orri Vésteinsson, 'Ethnicity and class', pp. 494–7.
[77] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 Years*, p. 48.
[78] Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 years*, pp. 45–50.
[79] Wallace, 'Vikings in North America', p. 213.
[80] 'Wood, which they chopped in the forest there, and some driftwood from the shore'; 'stately', *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 24 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 67).

> Þat sumar lét Óláfr gera eldhús i Hjarðarholti, meira ok betra en menn hefði fyrr sét. Váru þar markaðar ágætligar sǫgur á þilviðinum ok svá á ræfrinu; var þat svá vel smíðat, at þá þótti miklu skrautligra, er eigi váru tjǫldin uppi […] þat boð var allfjǫlmennt, því at þá var algǫrt eldhúsit. Þar var at boði Úlfr Uggason ok hafði ort kvæði um Óláf Hǫskuldsson ok um sǫgur þær, er skrifaðar váru á eldhúsinu, ok færði hann þar at boðinu. Þetta kvæði er kallat Húsdrápa ok er vel ort. Óláfr launaði vel kvæðit. Hann gaf ok stórgjafar ǫllu stórmenni, er hann hafði heim sótt. Þótti Óláfr vaxit hafa af þessi veizlu.[81]
>
> That summer Óláfr had built a 'fire-hall' at Hjarðarholt, bigger and better than anyone had seen before. There were superbly drawn sagas on the panelling and also on the roof; it was so well crafted, that it was considered much finer when the tapestries were not up […] this feast was attended by a great many, because by then the fire-hall was finished. There was at the feast Úlfr Uggason, and he had composed a poem about Óláfr Hǫskuldsson and about those sagas, which were drawn on the fire-hall, and he delivered it there at the feast. This poem is called Húsdrapa and is well-composed. Óláfr rewarded the poem well. He gave also substantial gifts to all the important people who had visited him. Óláfr was thought to have grown in stature from this feast.

The splendour of Óláfr's hall is closely associated with his reputation; the poem celebrates both together, and this wedding feast which cements his position as one of the leading men in Iceland could not have taken place without his huge *skáli*. The imported wood is a practical necessity, but it is also symbolic of the continuing relationship with Norway and desire to emulate Norwegian customs even when to do so involves a long and potentially dangerous sea journey. It is significant too that Óláfr goes to Hákon *jarl*, the ruler of Norway, to ask for timber. As with clothing and weapons, royal approval and a royal gift add special status to the material symbols of Óláfr's wealth, and that Icelandic desire to imagine themselves among the civilized elite of Europe, despite their remote location, is revealed once again.

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[81] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 29 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 79–80).

An almost identical pattern is followed in *Vatnsdæla saga*, with a substantial initial settlement further aggrandized by the use of imported timber given to Ingimundr by the king of Norway:

> Ingimundr kaus sér bústað í hvammi einum mjǫk fǫgrum ok efnaði til bœjar; hann reisti hof mikit hundrað fóta langt […] Hann setti saman virðuligt bú ok gerðisk brátt yfirmaðr Vatnsdœla ok þeira sveita, er nálægstar váru […]
>
> Þá er Ingimundr hafði búit nǫkkura hríð at Hofi, lýsir hann útanferð sinni at sœkja sér húsavið, því at hann kvazk vel vilja sitja bœ sinn ok kvazk vænta, at Haraldr konungr myndi honum vel taka […] Konungr mælti: "Þat er vel gǫrt, er þér ok heimil vár mǫrk sem þú vill hǫggva láta, an ek mun láta til skips fœra" […]
>
> Ingimundr átti ágætt bú með nógum efnum; hann bœtti nú mikit bœ sinn, því at efnin váru nóg; hann fekk sér ok goðorð ok manna forráð.[82]

> Ingimundr chose himself a dwelling place in a very beautiful little valley and made preparations for a farmstead; he raised a large temple a hundred feet long […] He put together a fine farm and was soon made chieftain of the people of Vatnsdal and those districts which lay closest […]
>
> Then when Ingimundr had lived for some time at Hof, he announced a voyage abroad of his to obtain for himself timber for a house, because he said he wished to establish properly his farm and said he expected that Haraldr *konungr* would receive him well […] The king spoke: "It is well done, and I will allow you the right to harvest timber as you like in our woods, and I will have it carried to the ship" […]
>
> Ingimundr had a superb farm with abundant raw materials; he improved now greatly his farmstead, because he had plenty of materials; he also obtained a *goðorð* and leadership over men.

Again the construction of a large homestead on the Norwegian model is directly associated with Ingimundr's status and position as chieftain. His first efforts in building

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[82] *Vatnsdæla saga*, chs. 15–16 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 42–5).

his homestead earn him the local chieftancy, while his foreign improvements are followed by winning a *goðorð* and wider influence.

The settlers in *Kjalnesinga saga* also establish themselves in the district by putting up large houses and temples, with Þórgrímr's temple roof held up by massive wooden beams that must have been imported. The description of the temple immediately follows a passage describing Þórgrímr's power and authority in the district, manifested in his *goðorð*, once again linking prestige with the scale and materials used in building works.[83] In *Njáls saga* the two most dramatic scenes, the attack on Gunnarr at Hlíðarendi and the burning at Bergþórshvóll, can only be realized in the way they are because the saga depicts both houses as being large and made principally of wood. The saga even states specifically that 'skáli Gunnars var gǫrr af viði einum ok súðþakiðr utan', which seems to confirm that in reality entirely wooden houses were rare, and were hard for a later medieval Icelander to visualize without that further detail about the overlapping boards.[84] However far the depictions in these (and other) sagas may be removed from medieval reality, this image of large wooden halls is what the creators of the sagas wished their audiences to associate with their ancestors in tenth-century Iceland.

The two key elements of Adam of Bremen's disparaging description of Icelandic housing are first that the Icelanders live underground, and second that they do not have enough wood to build proper houses; both ideas are transplanted onto the barbaric Other in various sagas. Again it is the Vínland sagas which provide the best examples of this strategy in action, though there are others. In particular, the idea of living underground occurs a few times. In *Flóamanna saga* Viking raiders in Ireland find an 'earth-house' in the middle of a forest:

> Þeir kómu til Írlands um sumarit. Var þar skógr fyrir, er þeir kómu at; gengu síðan upp í skóginn, ok í einum stað sá þeir fallit lauf af tré. Þeir kippa upp eikinni ok finna þar jarðhús undir. Þeir sjá menn með vápnum niðri í húsinu.[85]
>
> They came to Ireland during the summer. There was a wood before them, where they arrived; they walked up into the wood, and in one place they saw leaves

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[83] *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 2, 4 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 5–9 and 12–3).
[84] 'Gunnarr's hall was built entirely of wood with overlapping boards on the outside', *Njáls saga*, chs. 77, 129–30 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 186 and 328–33).
[85] *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16 (ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 262).

> fallen from a tree. They pulled up the oak and discovered an earth-house underneath. They saw men with weapons down in the house.

This extract is one of several passages in *Flóamanna saga* that are more fantastical than most of the family sagas. It is unique among the *Íslendingasögur* in identifying living underground with Ireland, but plays on earlier traditions of underground houses in Britain and Ireland, including a similar story told more briefly in *Landnámabók*.[86]

Towards the end of *Eiriks saga rauða*, after encountering, trading and fighting with the *Skrælingar*, Karlsefni and his men find five local people in the heavily wooded *Markland*, including two children who later learn Norse and describe *Skræling* society to the Norsemen:

> Tóku þeir Karlsefni sveinana, en hinir kómusk undan, ok sukku þeir Skrælingar í jǫrð niðr […] Þeir sǫgðu, at konungar stjórnuðu Skrælingum, ok hét annarr þeira Avaldamon, en annar Avaldidida. Þeir kváðu þar engin hús; lágu menn þar í hellum eða holum.[87]

> Karlsefni and his company captured the boys, but the others got themselves away, and sank into the earth below […] They said that kings ruled the *Skrælingar*, the one called Avaldamon, and the other Avaldidida. They said there were no houses there; people there slept in caves or holes.

Here living underground is associated with an escape from danger that can be read either as the *Skrælingar* being supernatural creatures, or at the very least as using magic in combat, as they had done in the encounter described earlier; alternatively it could be read as a straightforward retreat into a well-concealed underground hide or home.[88] It does not perhaps matter too much which, as either interpretation serves to 'other' the *Skrælingar*, making them cowards as well as either magic-users or earth-dwellers. Like the *Írar* in *Flóamanna saga*, the important point is that these barbaric foreigners, who

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[86] *Landnámabók*, ch. S 6 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 41); cf. *Historia Norwegie*, ch. 6 (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, pp. 64–5).
[87] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 233–4).
[88] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 233–4).

have already shown themselves to be Other by running from danger, are associated with living underground.

Living underground is one of Adam of Bremen's comments about Icelandic housing, and the other is a lack of materials for proper house building, a suggestion which the sagas go to some lengths to disprove, as has been discussed. The materials used for the housing of barbarians (when not living underground) are mentioned in *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Grænlendinga saga*. In both sagas it is not a lack of resources that is the limiting factor, as both episodes are set in woodland, but rather the inability of the local people to use the resources properly. Like the grapes, wheat and lush grass which are unused by the *Skrælingar*, the abundant timber of Vínland is a resource which is wasted on these savages. Conversely, it is a resource which, one infers by the harvesting of timber to take to Greenland, the Icelanders thought their own ancestors would have made much better use of if they were able to.

In both episodes the structure of the houses is also a feature which contributes to a depiction which makes the indigenous housing seem inferior to the Icelandic equivalent. In *Vatnsdæla saga* a structure built of stone has an unlikely impermanence to it, as Þorkell *krafla* ('Scratcher') discovers while raiding in *Skotland*. Having disappeared from the main raiding party, he is found in a forest clearing in the act of defeating six enemies, and recounts the circumstances leading up to this situation thus:

> Hann kvazk farit hafa hjá kastala einum, — "ok þar sem eg gekk, hrǫpuðu ór steinvegginum steinar nǫkkurir, ok þar í fann ek fé eigi svá lítit; ok þetta sá kastalamenn ok sóttu eptir mér, ok varð þá fundr várr slíkr sem sjá mátti."[89]
>
> He said he had passed near a castle, — "and there where I walked, some stones tumbled out of the stone walls, and in there I found no small quantity of wealth; and the castle-dwellers saw this and pursued me, and our meeting turned out in the way you can see."

A *kastali* sounds impressive, but a crumbling castle built from loose stones rather less so. From a historical perspective this structure sounds a lot like a broch — large, circular dry-stone structures which were in use in parts of Scotland into the early medieval

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[89] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 43 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 114).

period, including in Shetland, the Orkneys, and Caithness.[90] The story is clearly fictitious, as an inhabited broch would not be likely to have loose stones falling from the walls, especially near the base with several tonnes of stone resting on them (even assuming Þorkell helped them a little). However, it is conceivable, even likely, that the author of the saga or someone known to him had seen the ruins of uninhabited brochs in one of these regions, a number of which survive even to this day, with piles of loose stones lying around them, and reconstructed them in his mind into a substantial, if somewhat unstable, *kastali*.

With this plausible explanation in mind, it is still worth considering the literary implications of the scene to understand the Icelandic view of the *Skotar*. Just because dry-stone *kastala* existed in Scotland at the time does not mean that the author was obliged to use one in the story. Compared with, for example, Gunnarr's hall in *Njáls saga*, which requires a large number of men and an ingenious use of torque to pull the roof off, this building is falling apart of its own accord. It is badly constructed and carelessly maintained, and a further lack of planning in its inhabitants is witnessed by the storage of all their valuables in this weak section of the structure. The implication is that because the *Skotar* have such a negligent attitude towards their house, Þorkell is justified in helping himself to their possessions. This is in some ways similar to the situation with the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga*, though in Vínland the Norsemen are unable to hold onto the wasted resources which should by rights (they might think) be theirs. Although the *Skrælingar* are better able to protect their possessions than the *Skotar* in *Vatnsdæla saga*, their housing is yet more primitive, both in terms of construction and materials:

> Ganga síðan til skips ok sjá á sandinum inn frá hǫfðanum þrjár hæðir, ok fóru til þangat ok sjá þar húðkeipa þrjá ok þrjá menn undir hverjum. Þá skiptu þeir liði sínu ok hǫfðu hendr á þeim ǫllum, nema einn komsk í burt með keip sinn. Þeir drepa hina átta ok ganga síðan aptr á hǫfðann ok sjásk þar um ok sjá inn í fjǫrðinn hæðir nǫkkurar, ok ætluðu þeir þat vera byggðir.[91]

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[90] Cf. Laing, *Archaeology of Celtic Britain*, pp. 320–1; Laing, *Archaeology of Late Celtic Britain*, p. 48.
[91] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 255–6).

> Then they returned to the ship and saw on the beach inland from the headland three hillocks; they approached them and saw there three hide-boats and three men under each of them. They divided their group and got their hands on all of them except one, who escaped with his boat. They killed the eight and returned to the headland, looking around, and they saw several hillocks further up the fjord, and they thought that they were dwellings.

Houses are a running theme in *Grænlendinga saga*; when Leifr arrives in Vínland the construction of two large long-houses is one of the first things he and his men do. Later his brother Þórvaldr uses these houses, and Leifr also agrees to lend (though not give) his houses to Karlsefni for his trip, and then finally to lend them to his sister Freyðís, who begins an ultimately fatal squabble with her partners in the expedition by refusing to share the houses with them. The narrative of Norse housing in Vínland in the saga thus reads that they arrived in a well-forested land and immediately built good houses, which lasted many years despite periods when they were unoccupied, and were a valuable asset to subsequent expeditions. The archaeological evidence from L'Anse Aux Meadows supports this narrative to a large extent, though it is worth mentioning again that the houses the Norsemen built there were, like other Viking Age houses in Greenland and Iceland (but unlike houses in the sagas) clad in turf.[92]

The narrative of *Skræling* housing in the saga is completely different. First there are the *hæðir* on the beach which turn out to be *húðkeipir* with three men under each of them. This passage is so vague that it is hard to make sense of how long the skin-boats have been there, or what the *Skrælingar* are doing under them. Were they there when the Norsemen arrived, but went unnoticed in the excitement of landing, in which case do they represent a temporary camp? Or is it a comically obvious covert mission by the *Skrælingar* trying to get close to the strangers and their ship, hoping in their naivety to go unnoticed by the simple tactic of hiding under their over-turned boats? Neither is flattering to the *Skrælingar*, though the final part of the passage suggests that the first interpretation is the correct one, that the *Skrælingar* are using their boats to camp under.

The final sentence about more hillocks further up the fjord also implies that upturned boats are not just a temporary solution while away from their homes, but are used as permanent dwellings by the *Skrælingar*. The association of animal skins with less

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[92] Wallace, 'Vikings in North America', p. 213.

civilized people has already been discussed in the context of clothing, but here it is taken to a new extreme. The *Skrælingar* live, in a heavily wooded landscape, in impermanent, hide-covered shelters which may in fact all be used as boats at other times, or if not certainly closely resemble upturned boats.

To find a Norseman sheltering under an upturned boat one has to look to *Fljótsdæla saga*, where a Norwegian in Iceland hides from his enemies under a heavy boat in a shed full of sheep. His pursuers prod the earth and sheep-dung under the boat with their spear points while he braces himself up against the timbers of the boat and suffers in silence a spear-thrust through his thigh.[93] Although the Norwegian, Gunnarr, is portrayed positively for the most part, his hiding place is cold, dirty, smelly, and undignified. It is a desperate measure for a man who is effectively an outlaw, and whose enemies are actively searching for him — not a way of life, as it seems to be for the *Skrælingar*.

There is, however, another model for a barbaric people sleeping under their boats which was available to the learned elite of medieval Iceland, and it comes from Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum*. According to Sallust the Numidians used their upturned boats to live under when they first arrived in Africa, and have been dwelling in similar structures ever since:

> Ex eo numero Medi, Persae et Armenii, nauibus in Africam transuecti, proxumos nostro mari locos occupauere. Sed Persae intra Oceanum magis, eique alueos nauium inuersos pro tuguriis habuere, quia neque materia in agris neque ab Hispanis emendi aut mutandi copia erat: mare magnum et ignara lingua commercio prohibebant. Ii paulatim per conubia Gaetulos secum miscuere et, quia saepe temptantes agros alia, deinde alia loca petiuerant, semet ipsi Nomadas appellauere. Ceterum adhuc aedificia Numidarum agrestium, quae mapalia illi uocant, oblonga, incuruis lateribus tecta quasi nauium carinae sunt.[94]
>
> From that number of Medes, Persians and Armenians, transported to Africa by ship, they occupied the regions closed to our sea. But the Persians were closer to the Ocean, and they had the inverted hulls of their ships for huts, since there

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[93] *Fljótsdæla saga*, ch. 19 (ed. Jón Jóhannesson, pp. 277–9).
[94] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 18.4–8 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 62).

> was no supply of wood in the land, nor could it be bought or traded from the Spanish: the vast sea and unknown language prohibited trade. They little by little through marriage were mixed with the Gaetulians and, since they were often trying different lands, they travelled from there to other places, and called themselves Nomads. From this still the buildings of the rural Numidians, which they call *mapalia*, are oblong with curved sides to the roof, like the hulls of ships.

The Icelandic version with a fuller translation, *Rómverja saga* AM 595, is missing for this section of the text, but given its faithfulness to the Latin where it has survived it can be assumed that it originally contained a close rendering of these lines. The slightly more abridged translation AM 226 does not include the final detail about Numidian peasants continuing to live in houses like upturned ships, but it does preserve the crucial idea of the ancestors of the current Numidians using their ships for houses:

> Af þessum her foro til Affrica nockurir menn. Medíj. Persi. ok Armenij. ok bygdu næri Midiardar sio. ok Persi þo næstir vt hafínu. þeir huelfdu skipum sinum. ok hofdu þau fyrir hus. Enn þeir mattu æigi kaup ferd reka til Hispaniam fyrir hafstormum, ok tungu okunnrí. þeir dreifduz til Getulis at kuanfóngum. Af þeim kom su ætt er menn kalla Numídies. þeir bygdu landít med þorpum ok husum.[95]

> Of this army some men travelled to Africa. Medes, Persians, and Armenians, and they dwelt near the Mediterranean. The Persians were closest to the ocean. They overturned their ships and used these for houses. But they were unable to make trade journeys to Spain on account of sea storms and the unknown language. They dispersed and intermarried with the Gaetulians. From these are descended that race which men call Numidians. They settled the land with hamlets and houses.

The Numidians in the original Latin are presented as being more civilized than the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga*, because they only sleep under their boats in

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[95] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 7 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 19–20).

desperation due to a lack of timber. However, the fact that they continue to build houses like upturned ships suggests a simplicity and an unwillingness to change which makes them a curiosity to the Romans, and therefore 'other' and less civilized than them. Although AM 226 does not include this slightly barbarizing detail, the way it tells the first part is subtly different from the Latin in that it does not directly link using ships for houses with a lack of timber. This makes the overturning of the ships the result either of laziness, eccentricity, or ignorance of proper building techniques, any or all of which might also be implied by the *Skræling* houses. Sallust asserts that the etymology of the name 'Numidians' derives from calling themselves 'Nomads', on account of their nomadic lifestyle during their early years in Africa, and the fact that this leads into his claim about them still living in houses like upturned boats implies that during their nomadic period the Numidians continued camping under their boats, like the *Skrælingar*.

Sallust also describes the living conditions of two peoples already inhabiting Africa before the arrival of the people who would become Numidians, these being the Libyans and Gaetulians. These peoples are portrayed as savages, at the bottom of the civilization ladder compared to the Numidian barbarians and the civilized Romans:

> Africam initio habuere Gaetuli et Libyes, asperi incultique, quis cibus erat caro ferina atque humi pabulum uti pecoribus. Ei neque moribus neque lege aut imperio cuiusquam regebantur; vagi palantes, quas nox coegerat sedes habebant.[96]

> In the beginning the Gaetulians and Libyans inhabited Africa, rough and uncultivated peoples, whose food was the flesh of wild animals and plants of the earth, like cattle. They were ruled not by customs nor law nor any authority; wandering aimlessly, they settled wherever night compelled them.

> I Affrica bygdu fyrst þær þiodír er Gotile heíta. ok Libies. ok fædduz vid dyra holld. þeir hofdu ónguan hǫfdíngia. ok ecki hus. ok engín lǫg. ok lifdu sem eínn fenadr. ok lagu þar sem þeir komu at kuelldi.[97]

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[96] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 18.1–2 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 60).
[97] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 7 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 19).

> In Africa dwelt first those peoples known as the Gaetulians and the Libyans, and they ate the flesh of animals. They had no chieftains, and no houses, and no laws, and lived like livestock, sleeping wherever they stopped in the evening.

Although the conclusion that the Gaetulians and Libyans live like beasts is the same in both versions, in the Latin text this is a reflection on their diet, whereas in the Norse version it seems to refer to their lack of laws, chieftains, and especially permanent dwellings. This resembles the statements of the captured *Skræling* children in *Eiríks saga* about their people having no houses, but instead living in caves and holes, although it is not a perfect reproduction, since according to the children the *Skrælingar* do have two kings for chieftains. The final clause also brings to mind the nine *Skrælingar* discovered under their boats on the beach in *Grænlendinga saga*, if one assumes that they were camping or even living roughly under their boats. A little further on in *Bellum Jugurthinum*, Sallust again describes the living conditions of the Gaetulians, writing that 'partim in tuguriis, alios incultius uagos agitare', associating *incultius* (which here being an adverb is translated 'roughly', but which we encountered as an adjective in the context of food in the previous chapter meaning 'uncivilized' or 'uncultivated') directly with a lack of permanent housing.[98] Saxo Grammaticus, who used Sallust in his *Gesta Danorum*, describes, in similar words and with an identical meaning to Sallust on the Africans, the nomadic lifestyle of the *Finni* in the same passage that was referred to earlier with regard to weapons, writing that 'incerta illis habitatio est uagaque domus, ubicunque feram occupauerint, locantibus sedes'.[99]

Living underground does not feature in *Bellum Jugurthinum*, but the other elements of barbaric housing are consistent across both the Latin text and the sagas. These are a lack of or failure to use wood to build houses to a proper design, and a sense of impermanence. Although the stone *kastali* in *Skotland* seems at first to be a very different thing to the hide-covered huts of the *Skrælingar*, they share this sense of impermanence and therefore of poor design with little thought to the future; both peoples, of course, fail to use the abundant supplies of good building wood available to them. The temporary nature of these solutions resembles too the barbarians in Sallust's work,

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[98] 'Some live in huts, others roughly as nomads', Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 19.5 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 64).
[99] 'Their lodgings are irregular and homes nomadic, making their residence wherever they find game', Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* V.xiii.1 (ed. Friis-Jensen, p. 350).

especially the itinerant Gaetulians and Libyans, but also the Numidians who resort to a temporary fix by overturning their boats instead of building proper houses. The *Skrælingar* also live under what appear to be upturned boats, which could conceivably be directly inspired by Sallust's description of the Numidians.

The similarity could be coincidental, arising from a reasonably accurate tradition having survived through to the thirteenth century of what *Skræling* houses were actually like. The materials and techniques used for building houses by the people in that part of North America at the turn of the millennium were not too dissimilar to the description in *Grænlendinga saga*.[100] However, cultural stereotypes and literary purposes clearly play an important role in these depictions. The account in *Eiríks saga* of *Skrælingar* living in holes and caves seems like pure invention, putting them on a level with the outlaws and criminals of the *Íslendingasögur*, though it may be true that they had no houses by the Icelandic definition of the word. Leifr's houses in Vínland play an important and recurring role in *Grænlendinga saga*, and their permanence and value to their various inhabitants is contrasted against the upturned boats of the *Skrælingar*. Finally, the word *kastali* in *Vatnsdæla saga* implies that its inhabitants are of high social status, a local chieftain at least, as does the wealth Þórkell finds stockpiled in the wall. However, the crumbling ruin in which this chieftain lives, perhaps modeled on the ruins of brochs, seems vastly inferior to the grand hall and temple of the Vatnsdælir chieftains back in Iceland, as do the men within it, who are robbed and then fought off by a young boy from that more impressive Icelandic background.

There are some striking similarities between Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum* and *Grænlendinga saga*, but whether they were borrowed directly or not, both share the idea that the houses (or lack thereof) of a people are an important part of their nature as well as a way to class them by civilization level. This idea is clearly evident in Adam of Bremen's description of the Icelanders themselves, and indeed in other classical and medieval authors such as Tacitus when he writes of German free children and slave children sharing the same mud floor, and Gerald of Wales claiming that the Irish 'are a wild and inhospitable people' who 'live on beasts only, and like beasts', just like Adam writes of the Icelanders and Sallust of the Gaetulians and Libyans.[101] The examples

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[100] Odess, Loring and Fitzhugh, '*Skræling*', pp. 194 and 200–5.
[101] Tacitus, *Germania* 20 (ed. Städele, p. 102); Gerald of Wales, *Topography of Ireland* (trans. O'Meara, p. 85).

show that here, as elsewhere, the Icelanders are participating in a wider European tradition of othering through material culture.

CHAPTER THREE: IN BATTLE

As Kapuściński's interpretation of Other theory suggests, contact with the Other can be peaceful and productive, but where there are cultural and linguistic obstacles, mutual distrust can easily lead to violence.[1] It is, therefore, no surprise to find that in almost all encounters with barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* there are undertones of violence, and in many there is open conflict. As was established in the introductory sections on the *Írar* and *Skotar*, there are several descriptions of pitched battles against both peoples, and both the Vínland sagas feature battles with the *Skrælingar*. This shows that war is a regular feature of interactions with barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur*, and these occurrences have a number of recurring features in common.

This chapter will examine the battles between Icelanders and barbarians that are described in the *Íslendingasögur*, identifying the features which they have in common with each other and also those which they share with classical descriptions of battles with barbarians. This material will be separated into three main sections, with the preparations for battle made by barbarians considered first, then their actions during combat, and their behaviour after battle coming under examination afterwards. In this chapter I will use the word 'barbarian' more freely than before, to refer to the peoples of Vínland, *Skotland*, and *Írland*, as portrayed in the sagas. The justification for this is that, based on the evidence discussed in the previous two chapters, there can be little doubt that the Icelanders, though they did not actually use the word themselves, viewed these peoples as barbarians in much the same sense that any literate people considered (and, indeed, considers) themselves 'civilized' and the Other 'barbaric'.

Before embarking on this subject one particular incident from *Njáls saga* serves both to preface and to qualify the discussion. This is the killing of Hǫskuldr *Hvítanessgoði*, who is killed, not by foreign barbarians, but by his own foster-brothers, the Njálssons, in an encounter which has much in common with battles between Icelanders and barbarians. Hǫskuldr's attackers both outnumber and ambush him, and they taunt him with the suggestion that he would run from danger; as these will be the main themes identified in barbarian attacks it is important to emphasize that these tactics are used by Icelanders as well. The key feature of this attack, however, as with other incidences of Icelanders ambushing each other with superior numbers, is that the attackers are clearly in the

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[1] Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 20–1, 73 and 79–82.

wrong. The murder of Hǫskuldr is arguably the most evil act in the whole of *Njáls saga*, and is the catalyst for the main tragedy of the saga, so it is fitting that it is carried out in this dishonourable manner.[2] So to argue, as this chapter will, that barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* use advantages of numbers and the element of surprise in their battles, is not to argue that this is exclusively the preserve of barbarians, but to argue that whether used by Icelanders or barbarians, it has negative connotations. The difference is that although Icelanders can be 'Us' as well as 'Them', barbarians are always 'Them', and as a result they are always depicted as using some or all of these tactics that have negative connotations; this is key to understanding the Icelandic attitude towards the barbarian Other.

Advantage in numbers

First of all it is worth considering the situations in which these battles take place. Geographically speaking, all of them are outside Iceland, and all are outside areas which had a Norse power structure and language after the tenth century. The only battle described where the Norse can be argued to be defending their own territory against an invader is the attack on Þorsteinn's kingdom in *Skotland* by the *Skotar*, and even in this case the lands in question were conquered by Þorsteinn only a short time before. At the battle of Clontarf, although Dublin had originally been a Viking settlement, the Viking forces are in the sagas portrayed as aggressors against the rightful king. In *Egils saga* the battle at Vínheiðr is a defensive battle fought against an invading army, but it is *England* which is being invaded, which is not of course the homeland of the protagonists, so their role in the battle does not reflect this position. All of this is to say that it can be argued that in every single battle described in the sagas between a primarily Scandinavian force and a foreign army, the Norsemen are the initial aggressors, invaders and colonizers. In the presentation of these battles, however, the Icelanders and the force with which they are associated are often portrayed as the victims of the scene, with violence being instigated against them.

This is achieved largely because the battles are always narrated from an Icelandic point of view, with Icelandic and Norwegian characters (who usually already have the sympathy of the audience from the rest of the saga) playing important roles. This

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[2] Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, p. 112.

inevitable bias is complemented in most cases by a consistent practice of giving the barbarians a military advantage at the point when the battle starts, making the Scandinavian force the underdogs. The most obvious technique by which this is achieved is making the barbarian army greatly outnumber the protagonists and their followers. This is the case in all the battles in which the *Skotar* and the *Skrælingar* are the enemy, and in most of the battles against the *Írar*. It is of course also a common theme in fights between Icelanders, but here too the characters who have the sympathy of the author and the moral high ground are almost always the ones who are outnumbered.

That there was a concept in medieval Norse literature of a fair battle being one in which both sides have equal numbers is demonstrated by the opening of *Kormáks saga*, in which Kormákr's father Ǫgmundr arranges a battle at a set time and place with a viking called Ásmundr. 'Ásmundr hafði fleira lið ok lagði eigi ǫllu til orrustu', and lost as a result, and though Ásmundr flees in the end one must assume that his honour is less tainted for having met Ǫgmundr with an equal number of men.[3] In the legendary sagas this theme also surfaces on several occasions. In *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* the two foster-brothers Þorsteinn and Beli pause before a battle when Þorsteinn comments: 'Þat er lítil drengmennska at sækja at þeim með fimmtán skipum, en þeir hafa eigi meir en tólf', to which Beli replies: 'Hví skulum vér eigi láta liggja hjá þrjú skip?'[4] In a similar episode in *Örvar-Odds saga* Hjálmarr leaves behind ten ships so that he and Oddr can fight fairly with five ships each. In both these examples the two sets of opponents eventually recognize each other's worth and honour and form fellowships in order to co-operate in the future. Not all Vikings obey these conventions, but unlike the honourable Hjálmarr, those who seek to use tactics or numbers against Oddr are swiftly dispatched.[5]

Often a barbarian advantage in numbers is explicitly stated, as in *Njáls saga*, when a merchant ship with Helgi and Grímr on-board is attacked by thirteen ships under the command of two *skozkr* noblemen who are relatives of the *skozkr* king. Naturally the Icelanders defend the ship well against these odds, until Kári Sǫlmundarson arrives with ten ships and joins them. Kári's first words when he arrives are calculated to emphasize

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[3] 'Ásmundr had more troops, but prepared not all for the battle', *Kormáks saga*, ch. 1 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 203).

[4] 'It is not very manly to attack them with fifteen ships when they have no more than twelve'; 'Why should we not leave behind three ships?', *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, ch. 21 (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 3, ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 58).

[5] *Örvar-Odds saga*, ch. 9 (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 2, ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 233–4).

this disparity in force, for he asks 'Hverir eigu hér leik svá ójafnan?'[6] There is an obvious literary reason for this vast difference in power, for it makes Helgi and Grímr's defence more heroic. Even more importantly, it means they can welcome Kári's assistance without it compromising their honour or masculinity, so that Kári's friendship with them and their family can begin without any hint of resentment. They have already proven themselves against massive odds, so Kári's offer of assistance is a convenience, not an embarrassment.[7] As a result of their efforts in the battle they can also be introduced with honour to Sigurðr the *jarl* of Orkney and given a place among his followers.

Although it can hardly be called a battle, Þorkell *krafla*'s skirmish in *Vatnsdæla saga*, which was touched upon in the last chapter in reference to the stone *kastala* in which the natives live, is similar in both exposition and effect. Þorkell, a twelve-year-old boy at this point, is attacked by six *Skotar* in a forest in *Skotland*, but despite being greatly outnumbered he holds them off and has killed four of them by the time help arrives, whereupon the last two flee. His standing with Sigurðr the *jarl* of Orkney, with whom he was raiding, rises greatly after this event. The *jarl* makes him one of his followers, as he did with Helgi and Grímr, and rewards him with a valuable axe and fine clothing as well as a trading ship and cargo.[8] Following this feat Þorkell returns to Iceland, becomes a *goði*, and is the heroic protagonist of the final part of the saga.

In *Egils saga*, Óláfr *Skotakonungr* invades *England* with 'a great army', and after an initial victory the size of his army grows still more:

> En er þat spurðisk, at Óláfr Skotakonungr hafði fengit sigr ok hafði lagt undir sik mikinn hluta af Englandi, hafði hann þá her miklu meira en Aðalsteinn, en þá sótti til hans mart ríkismanna. En er þetta spyrja þeir Hringr ok Aðils, — hǫfðu þeir saman dregit lið mikit, — þá snúask þeir í lið með Óláfi konungi; hǫfðu þeir þá ógrynni liðs.[9]

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[6] 'Who has a share in this game so uneven?', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 84 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 203).
[7] Receiving assistance in dangerous situations can be welcomed in the sagas, but it certainly could be resented by the most macho of characters, as in the Flateyjarbók version of *Fóstbræðra saga* when Þorgeirr slips over a high cliff but refuses to call for help from his sworn brother even though the angelica plant he is hanging from is gradually being uprooted, ch. 13 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 189–91).
[8] *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 43 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 114–5).
[9] *Egils saga*, ch. 52 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 130).

> And when it was heard, that Óláfr *Skotakonungr* had won a victory and subjugated to himself a large part of *England*, he had then a much larger army than Aðalsteinn, and then came to him many powerful men. And when Hringr and Aðils heard this — they had gathered together a great army — then they turned to the side of Óláfr *konungr*; they had then an innumerable host.

Aðalsteinn (Athelstan) then gathers a large army of his own, which he brings to meet Óláfr at a pre-arranged battle site, Vínheiðr.[10] However, when Egill and his brother Þórólfr are involved in an initial skirmish the odds against them are still daunting, for their ally Álfgeirr *jarl* soon flees with the greater part of the friendly force, leaving the brothers and their band of vikings to fight two enemy columns: 'liðsmunr var allmikill, ok þó fell meir lið þeira Aðils […] fellu þá mjǫk Bretar ok Skotar, en sumir snerusk á flótta'.[11] Again the uneven numbers set up a battle in which the Icelanders can distinguish themselves. Here the bravery and martial superiority of the Icelandic protagonists is deliberately set against the cowardice and incompetence of the *engelskr jarl* Álfgeirr. The army of Óláfr *Skotakonungr* only reaches its vast size because Álfgeirr is defeated in Northumbria, and Egill and Þórólfr fight against such great odds because Álfgeirr flees again with his men. Aðalsteinn is the only *Engelskr* leader to have success in the field, and even then the depiction of the battle in the saga makes it clear that Egill is personally responsible for Aðalsteinn's victory.[12] The narrative makes it clear that without Icelandic help the *Engelskr* army would have been annihilated by the invading barbarian force of *Skotar* and *Bretar*.[13]

In *Kormáks saga* two Icelandic brothers provide invaluable assistance to the Norwegian king Haraldr *gráfeldr* in a battle against a 'mikit lið' in *Írland*. The setting is like that at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga*, but the specifics are similar to the previous examples from *Njáls saga* and *Vatnsdœla saga*. During the rout of the *Írar* nine men turn against the two brothers, who slay them all and win praise and 'marga sœmð aðra' from the

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[10] 'Wen Heath', the location of which is unknown, but the battle is normally identified with the battle of Brunanburh.

[11] 'The odds were very steep, but nonetheless more of the army of Aðils fell […] fell then many *Bretar* and *Skotar*, but some turned to flight', *Egils saga*, ch. 53 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 138).

[12] *Egils saga*, chs. 52–4 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 130–41).

[13] Cf. Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 116–7; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', pp. 17–8.

king.[14] The distinction which Kormákr wins abroad does not add to his standing at home, however, as it does for Þorkell *krafla*. Instead it provides a contrast to his unhappy homelife, demonstrating his potential and his innate qualities in order to emphasize the waste of a man who could have been a great rather than tragic hero, were it not for the misfortune he suffers in his love life.

In other cases a stated disparity in numbers is perhaps used not for literary purposes, to enhance a specific character's reputation, but to excuse a historical failure, as with the attempts to colonize Vínland. In *Eiríks saga rauða* Karlsefni and his men are attacked by 'mikinn fjǫlða Skrælinga-skipa, svá sem straumr stœði', but although greatly outnumbered, only 'tveir menn fellu af þeim Karlsefni, en fjǫlði af þeim Skrælingum'. Although this sounds like a promising result for fighting future battles, the scale of the attack contributes to making Karlsefni and his followers realize that 'þar myndi jafnan ótti ok ófriðr á liggja af þeim, er fyrir bjuggu' and decide to leave Vínland.[15] In *Grœnlendinga saga*, Þorvaldr's expedition to Vínland ends in the same way, with a prophetic voice waking the Norsemen from sleep with these words:

> "Vaki þú, Þorvaldr, ok allt fǫruneyti þitt, ef þú vill líf þitt hafa, ok far þú á skip þitt ok allir menn þínir, ok farið frá landi sem skjótast." Þá fór innan eptir firðinum ótal húðkeipa, ok lǫgðu at þeim.[16]

> "Wake yourself, Þorvaldr, and all your company, if you want to keep your life, and go to your ship with all your men, and get away from land as quickly as you are able." Then came in up the fjord innumerable skin boats and attacked them.

The fact that the Greenlanders are so outnumbered (and lose their leader Þorvaldr in the ensuing skirmish) allows them to abandon the country without losing honour, since they defeat this barbarian force and force it to flee, but prudently decide to avoid future battles

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[14] 'Great army'; 'many other honours', *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 268–9).

[15] 'A great multitude of Skræling-boats, like a swollen stream'; 'two of Karlsefni's men fell, but many of the Skrælingar'; 'there would always be fear and war to be had from those who lived there before', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 228–30); note that in AM 557 it is not *fjǫlði* of the Skrælingar who die, but *fjórir* 'four', Lodewyckx, 'Freydís Eiríksdóttir rauða', p. 183.

[16] *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 256).

by leaving themselves. A similar strategic withdrawal following a hard-fought victory, but before an even more unbalanced battle can be forced on them, is adopted by Sigurðr *jarl* in *Njáls saga*. After taking an army to his lands in *Skotland* and defeating the *jarl* who has invaded them, Sigurðr learns that the *skozkr* king Melkólfr is on his way with 'mikinn landher'.[17] Following consultation with his men they decide to withdraw to Orkney and abandon his territory on the mainland. Presumably because, like the Greenlanders, they have already won a victory, discretion can be the better part of valour without them compromising their honour. Similarly, when Þorgils and Þorsteinn raid in *Írland* in *Flóamanna saga*, they have a successful raid, but retreat when a large force of *Írar* arrives. Later in the saga, while wintering in *Írland*, they are again threatened by 'lið mikit [sem] fara með skjöldum, eigi færa en hundrað manns', and though this incident is resolved peacefully the idea that a barbarian army has to greatly outnumber the protagonists to be a real threat is maintained.[18]

There are three exceptions to this theme in which barbarian armies always greatly outnumber the force associated with the Icelandic protagonist of the saga, two of them in battles against *írskr* royalty and one against an *írskr* force of uncertain size and leadership. This third incident is in *Svarfdæla saga*, when Karl helps his former enemy Skíði defeat the *Írar*, allowing them to be reconciled. The situation when Karl arrives is that the *Írar* are about to defeat Skíði, so one can perhaps assume that they outnumber Skíði, a supposition which is supported by the description of the battle, in which 'gekk Karl jafnan í gegnum lið Íra.'[19] This suggests that this incident too belongs in the same category as those above, with a smaller Norse force fighting heroically against a vast barbarian army, but it is not explicitly laid out thus.

The only battles with any real semblance of equality in numbers are Clontarf and a sea battle between Grettir Ásmundarson's great-grandfather Ǫnundr and Kjarvalr *Írakonungr* in the opening chapter of *Grettis saga*. In this battle both sides have five ships, and they fight a heavy battle before in the end the king flees. It is not the rout and total destruction of a much larger force, as in many of the earlier examples, but a close struggle from which both sides gain honour. The difference in tone can be explained by Kjarvalr's

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[17] 'A great land army', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 86 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 206–7).

[18] 'A great host coming with shields, no fewer than one hundred men', *Flóamanna saga*, chs. 16, 26 (ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 262–3 and 309–10).

[19] 'Karl repeatedly set himself against the Irish army', *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 28 (*Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 205).

prominent position as an ancestor of many of the important families in Iceland through his daughters.[20]

In the description of the battle of Clontarf in *Njáls saga* both sides seem equally matched in terms of numbers. The *írskr* king Brjánn (Brian Boru) is presented like a saint, and his positive portrayal overshadows the fact that his army is primarily an *írskr* one, which in other circumstances might have been treated as a barbarian army. Due to Brjánn's status it is not, and as his adversary Sigurðr *jarl* is also characterized as a good ruler the two armies are organized on the battlefield as if they are fairly similar in number.[21] Additionally, there are no important characters from the rest of the saga involved in the battle, so no one needs to fight and win against great odds for personal or plot development. In fact the battle does not really fit into a 'Norseman and barbarian' conflict motif at all, being a dispute within the political elite of northern Britain and *Írland*. In this respect it is from a literary perspective more like the feuds of Njáll and Gunnarr in Iceland than the battles of Sigurðr *jarl* in *Skotland*, being a conflict between equals who are drawn into collision through the machinations of lesser men and women.[22] As such I shall leave it aside for the rest of this chapter, though Brjánn will come under further scrutiny in the next chapter.

With the exception of two battles involving *írskr* kings there is a consistent theme in the *Íslendingasögur* that barbarian armies always greatly outnumber a Norse force, but still lose every battle, even if the ultimate result of the battle is a strategic withdrawal by the Norsemen. This seems like an obvious way for a partial reporter to describe war, but it should not be taken for granted; it is key to understanding medieval Icelandic attitudes to war. Firstly, this consistent partiality requires a sense of identity with a nation or people, contrasted against the barbarian Other. Secondly, it requires a moral compass which assumes that war must be justified, either because it is a defensive war, or because the enemy are not their equals — in other words that they are uncivilized and so deserving of conquest and defeat. Thirdly, the partiality relies on an honour system in which an honourable fight is one in which the numbers are equal on both sides; if one

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[20] *Grettis saga*, ch. 1 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 3–4); cf. Hermann Pálsson on the descendants of Kjarvalr and a summary of the daughters of Irish kings said to have been involved in the settlement, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 119–27 and 219; *Landnámabók*, ch. S 217/H 184 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 248–51).

[21] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (ed. Einar Ol. Sveinsson, pp. 449–50).

[22] Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, pp. 76–8.

side deliberately outnumbers the other then they are automatically morally inferior, and therefore, as in the second requirement, deserving of defeat.

Surprise attacks

Having entered battle with a significant advantage in numbers, barbarian armies in the sagas often try to further enhance their position through tactical maneuvers that use the landscape of the battlefield to their advantage. The battle between Aðalsteinn and Óláfr *Skotakonungr* in *Egils saga* is a good example. As was described above, both in the initial conditions of battle, and in actual combat during the struggle, the enemy forces of *Skotar* and *Bretar* greatly outnumber the *enskr* and *víkingr* units. However, before the battle, the *enskr* army pretends to negotiate in order to win time to build up their own army to a similar size, and when the *skozkr* and *brezkr* leaders realize this they discuss a strategy to recover their advantage:

> "Nú er þat ráð mitt, konungr, at vit brœðr ríðim þegar í nótt fyrir með okkru liði; má þat vera, at þeir óttisk nú ekki at sér, er þeir hafa spurt, at konungr þeira er nær með her mikinn; skulum vit þá veita þeim áhlaup, en er þeir verða forflótta, þá munu þeir láta lið sitt, en ódjarfari síðan í atgǫngu at móti oss." Konungi þótti þetta ráð vel fundit; "Munum vér búa her várn, þegar er lýsir, ok fara til móts við yðr."[23]

> "Now is this my counsel, king, that we two brothers ride ahead there tonight with our army; it may be, that they will not be afraid for themselves, because they have heard that their king is near with a great army; we should inflict on them an attack, and when they turn to flight, then they will abandon their army, and will afterwards be more timid in the battle against us." The king thought this advice very pleasing; "We will prepare our army, when it lightens, and come to join you."

Thanks to the guards which Þórólfr and Egill had posted this surprise attack is foiled, but the two sides engage anyway, and the battle ends with one of the *brezkr* leaders being

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[23] *Egils saga*, ch. 52 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 135).

killed, and the other throwing down his standard and fleeing with his band of men into a forest that formed one side of the battlefield, where they remain hidden. The next day the main battle begins, between two armies which are now similar in size, but their own bravery and the *jarl* in the forest, Aðils, ensure that when the two brothers Þórólfr and Egill come to fight, the odds are stacked against them:

> Þórólfr sótti fram hart ok lét bera merki sitt fram með skóginum ok ætlaði þar svá fram at ganga, at hann kœmi í opna skjǫldu konungs fylkinginni; hǫfðu þeir skjǫlduna fyrir sér, en skógrinn var til hœgra vegs; létu þeir hann þar hlífa. Þórólfr gekk svá fram, at fáir váru menn hans fyrir honum, en þá er hann varði minnst, þá hlaupa þar ór skóginum Aðils jarl ok sveit sú, er honum fylgði; brugðu þegar mǫrgum kesjum senn á Þórólfi, ok fell hann þar við skóginn.[24]

> Þórólfr pushed forwards hard and had his standard carried forward beside the woods and intended to go so far, that he would arrive on the unguarded side of the king's column; they had their shields before them, and the woods were on their righthand side; they used them for protection there. Þórólfr went so far forwards, that few of his men were before him, and then when he was least guarded, then ran out of the woods there Aðils *jarl* and his company, who were following him; immediately Þórólfr was pierced by many spears simultaneously, and he died there by the woods.

To summarize, Aðils *jarl* and his *brezkr* force attempt to use a surprise attack to gain an advantage for the coming battle, and then when that fails and the odds are even again they flee into the woods, where they prepare an ambush in order to gain a new advantage. This ambush is initially successful, and the bravery of the *víkingr* leader Þórólfr is his downfall, as he is abruptly cut off from his men and killed in a cowardly way, pierced through by many long spears so that he has no chance to fight back. Despite this tragedy, Egill counterattacks, killing Aðils personally with his sword in a fair combat, and routing the ambushers. This counterattack leads to the total defeat of the enemy army, and Egill is portrayed (and rewarded by the *enskr* king Aðalsteinn) as if he is solely responsible for the victory. The slaying of Brjánn *konungr* in *Njáls saga* is effected in the same way,

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[24] *Egils saga*, ch. 54 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 140).

when the evil viking Bróðir, having previously fled into some woods, runs back out in a surprise attack on the king.[25]

A similar tactic is employed by the *skozkr* army that attacks Sigurðr *jarl* in *Njáls saga*, where a surprise attack on the rear of the jarl's army gives the *Skotar* an advantage which they are unable to take advantage of only because of the actions of the Njálssons:

> Þá snýr Sigurðr jarl þangat herinum, ok heitir þar Dungalsgnípa, er fundrinn var fyrir ofan, ok laust í bardaga með þeim mikinn. Skotar hǫfðu látit fara sumt liðit laust, ok kom þat í opna skjǫldu jarlsmǫnnum, ok varð þar mannfall mikit, þar til er þeir Njálssynir sneru í móti ok bǫrðusk við þá ok kómu þeim á flótta. Verðr þá þó bardaginn harðr.[26]

> The Sigurðr *jarl* turned his army thence, and that place is called Duncansby Head, above which they met, and a great battle broke out between them. The Scots had set loose part of their army, and this came on the unguarded side of the *jarl*'s men, and there was a great loss of men there, until the Njálssons turned against them, fought with them, and drove them to flight. There was then a hard battle.

As in *Egils saga*, a deception that takes advantage of the landscape and the element of surprise is matched against the heroism of the Icelandic protagonists. The battle in *Kormáks saga* described above features the same element when the nine fleeing *Írar* suddenly turn against Kormákr and his brother when it is tactically expedient to do so.[27] A theme begins to emerge from these examples in which battles with barbarians are used to establish the martial credentials of Icelandic characters. Defeating a barbarian army in a battle with even numbers on both sides and no tactical use of landscape or surprise is not sufficient, which suggests that as individuals these enemies were considered inferior. It is also a judgement on the morals of the enemy, who attempt to forge a victory they do not deserve out of unfair advantages, so in these situations ethnological or political commentary merges with literary expediency in a narrative so convenient that it is no

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[25] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 157 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 450–3).
[26] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 86 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 207).
[27] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 19 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 268–9).

surprise that it is repeated in a number of different sagas, including in other genres. An incident in *Írland* from *Magnúss saga berfœtts* is similar to the battles described in *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga*, as the *Írar* take advantage of boggy ground that hampers the Norwegians to launch a surprise attack out of woodland, cutting off the king from his ships and eventually killing him.[28] In *Alexanders saga* Alexander's army come up against a huge *serkr* army containing many terrifying and monstrous peoples, and his advisers urge Alexander to attack at night to counter these disadvantages. Alexander, however, rejects this advice, calling it *þiova siðr*, and declares his intention to attack in daylight so that future historians cannot write 'at Alexander konungr hafe með prettum sigrat'.[29]

Another example from *Kormáks saga* of a surprise attack is the one in *Skotland* which ends Kormákr's life, an attack which resembles the one on Þórólfr in *Egils saga*:

> Þeir runnu upp á Skotland ok unnu mǫrg stórvirki ok hǫfðu mikit lið; í þeim her var engi slíkr sem Kormákr um afl og áræði.
>
> Eitt sinn, er þeir hǫfðu herjat, rak Kormákr flótta, en liðit var til skips farit; þá kom at Kormáki ór skógi blótrisi Skota, ok tóksk þar atgangr harðr. Kormákr var ósterkari, en risinn trollauknari.[30]

> They landed in *Skotland* and performed many great deeds and had a great army; in that army there was no one like Kormákr for strength and daring.
>
> Once, when they had raided, Kormákr pursued those fleeing, but his army had gone to the ship; then came at Kormákr out of the woods a 'heathen giant' of the *Skotar*, and a hard battle began. Kormákr was less strong, and the giant trollishly stronger.

Although it is a one-to-one combat this fight has most of the same themes as the battles against barbarians. The *blótrisi* is clearly representative of the *Skotar* who worship it, and behaves as they do in *Egils saga* when Þórólfr is ambushed. He attacks suddenly out of a forest when Kormákr, like Þórólfr, is isolated from his men and vulnerable, a

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[28] *Magnúss saga berfœtts*, ch. 25 (*Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 235–7).
[29] 'A thief's habit'; 'that Alexander *konungr* has conquered using trickery', *Alexanders saga*, chs. 68–9 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 67–8).
[30] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 27 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 299).

vulnerability caused by his own imprudent valour in continuing the raid when the rest of his band have had enough and returned to the ship. Although there is only one individual on each side the *blótrisi* has an advantage in power similar to the advantage in numbers barbarian armies have in other battles, and he also has a supernatural advantage, with a troll's strength that allows him, even as Kormákr slays him, to grab Kormákr by the chest and crush him to death. One senses that, as Þórólfr's death is a literary necessity for Egill to develop as a character, Kormákr's death is necessary for the saga to end, given that settling peacefully in Iceland and living out his days there has been denied him due to a witch's curse. It is an end which is honourable, thanks to the advantages the *blótrisi* has in their struggle, and the fact that Kormákr slays him first, but also unlucky, a recurring theme in Kormákr's life. It is also exotic enough to make his death so memorable that it stands out among a panoply of heroic saga deaths.

An example of a battle which combines the two themes of outnumbering and tactical advantage, as well as having a supernatural element to it, is the battle against the *Skrælingar* in *Eiríks saga rauða*. In this a large *skræling* force appears to be even larger and more dangerous due to a deception that makes Karlsefni and his men feel as if they are surrounded, in addition to the fear caused by an unfamiliar catapult:

> Við þetta sló ótta miklum á Karlsefni ok allt lið hans, svá at þá fýsti einskis annars en flýja ok halda undan upp með ánni, því at þeim þótti lið Skrælinga drífa at sér ǫllum megin, ok létta eigi fyrr en þeir koma til hamra nǫkkurra, ok veittu þar viðtǫku harða […] Tveir menn fellu af þeim Karlsefni, en fjǫlði af þeim Skrælingum. Urðu þeir Karlsefni ofrliði bornir ok fóru nú heim eptir þetta til búða sinna ok bundu sár sín ok íhuga, hvat fjǫlmenni þat mundi verit hafa, er at þeim sótti af landinu ofan. Sýnisk þeim nú sem þat eina mun liðit verit hafa, er af skipunum kom, en hitt fólkit mun verit hafa sjónhverfingar.[31]
>
> With this Karlsefni and all his force were seized by fear, so that they desired nothing else than to flee and to go up along the river, because they thought the Skræling force was rushing at them from all sides, and they did not stop until they came to some crags, and a hard battle began there […] Two of Karlsefni's

[31] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 229–30).

> men fell, and a multitude of the *Skrælingar*. It had happened that Karlsefni's men held off an overwhelming force, and they went now home after this to their booths and bound their wounds, and wondered what multitude that could have been, who attacked them from the land side. It seemed to them now that there had only been one force, which came from the boats, and the others must have been illusions.

Outnumbered from the beginning, then bombarded by strange missiles like cannonballs and finally surrounded, or so it seems, Karlsefni's retreat upriver has little shame in it. Their desire to find a cliff wall so that they can have a fair fight with the *Skrælingar* is both practical and symbolic of the honourable equal-numbered combat that allows the best man to win. In the event the *Skrælingar* are scared off by Freydís, who works her own simpler magic in response to the *skræling* deceptions by baring a breast, Amazon-style, and slapping a sword against it in defiance.[32] In this passage the use of magic by the *Skrælingar* creates an advantage that gives them the upper hand; thankfully, despite their own use of magic, a new and incomprehensible sight, Freydís with her sword, sends the barbarians into a panic and causes them to throw away their genuine advantage by retreating.

Both sides flee at one point or another, but while the Norse retreat is depicted as sensible and necessary, the *skræling* retreat is illogical and cowardly, which leads into the third central theme of battles against barbarians, flight from battle.

Flight

In the examples given above from *Eiríks saga rauða* as well as *Flóamanna saga* and *Njáls saga*, Norse forces effect tactical retreats when faced with overwhelming odds, though only after fighting in a way which demonstrates their courage and skill, allowing them to withdraw with honour. To actually flee, especially before even trying one's luck and skill in battle was certainly considered unmanly. In *Njáls saga*, Skarphéðinn mocks Hǫskuldr when he attacks him, calling out 'hirð eigi þú at hopa á hæl,

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[32] See discussion in chapter on Material Culture.

Hvítanessgoðinn'.[33] To imply that Hǫskuldr's first instinct when faced with danger would be to run insults him, but it also challenges him to stay and fight, if the peace-loving chieftain wants to be considered a proper man and warrior.[34]

Barbarian armies, by contrast, always lose (with the exception of the Battle of Clontarf, which as discussed above is a special case due to the central role of Brjánn *konungr* in it) and almost always run, often at the first suggestion that they might not win, or that the battle might be harder than expected. This is the case at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga*, in Þorkell's battle in *Vatnsdæla saga*, in Sigurðr *jarl*'s battle against the *Skotar* at Duncansby Head and in Haraldr *gráfeldr*'s battle in *Írland* in *Kormáks saga*. The only battle where this pattern is followed but it is not explicitly stated that the enemy fled is Skíði and Karl's battle against the *Írar* in *Svarfdæla saga*, which just ends with Karl slaying the enemy commander and most of his army, who may or may not have been in flight at the time. In all these cases a battle has been started on favourable terms to the barbarians, and the bravery of the Icelandic protagonists has turned the tide of battle against them, making flight, though not honourable, justified.

In other situations the inhabitants of *Skotland* and *Írland* flee from raiders, which is again fairly reasonable, and a feature they share with local populations all around the Baltic and Scandinavian zone; one expects raiders to target places where there will be little resistance. In *Kormáks saga* as well as *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* the *skozkr* victims of raiding flee into the woods without apparently offering any resistance. Fleeing in this situation may be understandable, but it does seem, rather cyclically, to justify the raids. *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* says that 'jarl drap margt óþjóðarfólk, en sumt flýði undan á skóga ok fóru þeir víða um Vestrlǫnd ok brenndu'; do they run because they are barbarians, or are they barbarians because they run?[35] If they are barbarians, and therefore inferior humans by nature, is it morally legitimate to raid them? In the mind of the saga-author, the answer to all three questions is probably 'yes'.

Even worse, in a number of instances, including the example given just above from *Eiríks saga rauða*, the barbarians flee while still in possession of a significant military advantage, sometimes without even engaging in battle at all. These situations are clear

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[33] 'Don't bother taking to your heels, Hvitanes-goði', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 111 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 280).

[34] Jesch, 'Warrior ideal', pp. 165-8.

[35] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 27 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 299); 'the *jarl* killed many barbarians [un-people-people], though some fled away into the woods, and they went all over the Western Lands and devastated them', *Þorsteins saga Síðu Hallssonar*, ch. 1 (*Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, p. 300).

demonstrations of the way in which the Icelandic authors of the sagas typecast the peoples of Vínland, *Skotland*, and *Írland* as cowardly, illogical and ignorant — in short, barbaric.

Karlsefni's battle against the *Skrælingar* is precipitated because during trading a bull owned by the Norsemen appears from the forest and begins bellowing loudly, and, at this unfamiliar sight and noise, which any Icelander would have known was (fairly) harmless, 'fælask Skrælingar ok hlaupa út á keipana ok reru síðan suðr fyrir landit'. When they return three weeks later they are in full battle mode, waving their weapons and 'ýla upp allir mjǫk hátt', a reaction which we know is unnecessary, but which proves their stupidity and inclination towards fear.[36]

In the first encounter with the *Skrælingar* in *Grænlendinga saga*, during Þórvaldr's expedition, the *Skrælingar* are justified in attacking the Greenlanders, because they have already killed several *Skrælingar* without provocation, but the way they go about it is cowardly and largely ineffective. The *Skrælingar* have a great advantage in numbers, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, so Þorvaldr has his men prepare for a defensive battle:

> Þorvaldr mælti þá: "Vér skulum fœra út á borð vígfleka ok verjask sem bezt, en vega lítt í mót." Svá gera þeir, en Skrælingar skutu á þá um stund, en flýja síðan í burt sem ákafast, hverr sem mátti.[37]

> Þorvaldr spoke then: "We shall fit the saxboards with a protective cover and protect ourselves as best we can, but fight back only little." They do so, and the *Skrælingar* shoot at them awhile, and then flee away with haste, each as he is able.

There is only one Norse casualty from this encounter, Þorvaldr himself, struck by a fluke arrow finding a chink in their defence. There is no sense that the *Skrælingar* have suffered any losses themselves at all, but the mere fact of their inability to make the progress they expected from their attack, together with their unwillingness to close and

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[36] See discussion in chapter on food and diet; 'the *Skrælingar* were frightened and ran out to the boats and then rowed southwards from the land'; 'all howling very loudly', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228).

[37] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 256).

fight hand-to-hand, is enough to put them off and cause them to flee with all haste. Like being frightened of a bull, it is pathetic, and is supposed to appear thus to the intended audience of the saga in medieval Iceland, who can enjoy a sense of superiority over these barbarians, safe in the knowledge that even the cowards among them would not have behaved in such an illogical manner.

A similar series of events characterizes Karlsefni's visit to Vínland later on in *Grænlendinga saga*. The *Skrælingar* again run from a bull, before calming down enough to trade. Then when one of them is killed for trying to take a weapon the rest flee, only to return in great numbers, ready for battle. Unusually, it is the Norsemen here who take advantage of the terrain to prepare an ambush from the woods for the *Skrælingar*, though this is fairly well justified by their extreme paucity of numbers. The tactic works and the battle ends with the *Skrælingar* fleeing, partly as a result of their interactions with a Norse axe, which confuses and scares them into flight.[38] Their flight from battle when their casualties become heavy is understandable, but the two flights that frame this encounter, the one from the bull, and the other from the axe, are used to demonstrate an irrational fear of the unfamiliar. This irrationality is made ridiculous by the fact that the two things they are afraid of are, as discussed in the previous chapters, everyday objects to Icelanders.[39]

In *Flóamanna saga*, when Þorgils and his men discover an underground house in *Irland* they can see armed men down below, and the advantage those men have over the raiders is demonstrated by the condition that Þorgils sets for being the first man to jump down, that he should be able to choose three treasures from the house before the loot is divided up. Nonetheless, when Þorgils does jump into the house he finds 'varð þar engi mótstaða […] hann hafði í hendi eina rótakylfu ok barði henni á báðar hendr, ok stökk flest undan'.[40] When Þorgils first enters the house he is outnumbered by armed men, and only has a club himself. However, despite their advantage the inhabitants of the house are too afraid or shocked by the sudden intrusion to fight back, and only run instead, abandoning their possessions as well as two women who are captured by the raiders.

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[38] See discussion in chapter on material culture; [38] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 261–4).

[39] In *Eiríks saga rauða* they also of course run irrationally from Freydís, as discussed in the previous section; Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 468.

[40] 'There was there no resistance […] he had in his hand a club and attacked with it on both sides, and most fled away', *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, p. 262).

A *skozkr* character who abandons his companions and runs to save himself at the first sign of danger is Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

> Í þessu kómu þeir Þórarinn eptir, ok varð Nagli skjótastr; en er hann sá, at þeir ofruðu vápnunum, glúpnaði hann ok hljóp umfram ok í fjallit upp ok varð at gjalti.[41]
>
> At this moment Þórarinn and his men came after them, and Nagli was the fastest; but when he saw them brandishing their weapons, he was disheartened and ran away up onto the mountain, mad with fear.

In this passage, which will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter, it takes only the sight of an enemy's weapons to terrify this *skozkr maðr* and cause him to flee. Usefully, the saga goes on to demonstrate the Icelandic response to this behaviour, when in the following chapter, after the battle has been fought and won, Nagli's companions mock him, composing verses about his cowardice:

> Nágöglum fekk Nagli
> nest dáliga flestum,
> kafsunnu réð kennir
> kløkkr í fjall at støkkva;
> heldr gekk hjalmi faldinn,
> hjaldrs, at vápna galdri,
> þurði eldr of aldir,
> Alfgeirt af hvöt meiri.
>
> Grátandi rann gætir
> geira stígs frá vígi,
> þar vasat grímu geymi
> góð vön friðar hönum,
> svát merskyndir myndi,
> men-skiljandi, vilja,

[41] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 37).

hugði bjóðr á bleyði
bifstaups, á sjó hlaupa.[42]

Most of the corpse geese
got a poor feed from Nagli;
faint-hearted, the knower
of the sea's sun fled into the hills;
With rather more spirit, Alfgeir
advanced into the song of weapons,
hidden by his helmet. Fire
of the battle whistled overhead.

Crying, the keeper of the sword's path
ran away from combat.
There seemed little hope of peace
to the guardian of the helmet,
so the mare-driver
preferred to dive into the sea;
cowardice was on the mind
of the cup-bearer, wreck of a man.[43]

The verses speak for themselves in condemning flight from battle, and demonstrate the reaction real men were supposed to have to someone who flees from danger, especially without even engaging in hand-to-hand combat first. These cowards are worthy only of ridicule; and this is the behaviour that in several sagas is attributed to barbarians, with the *Skrælingar* in particular fleeing from the slightest upset or danger, and *skozkr* and *írskr* people also sometimes fleeing with little reason to do so (and always fleeing in the end). Just as diet and material culture were used to describe the lifestyles of barbarians in a way which makes them appear inferior to the medieval Icelanders, their behaviour in battle, and especially their predisposition to flight, exposes them to ridicule and makes their courage and martial skill seem inferior.

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[42] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 19 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 45–6).
[43] Translations of verses taken from Judy Quinn's translation in *Complete Sagas of Icelanders V*, p. 150.

Classical barbarians in battle

As one might expect there are numerous examples in the texts of Caesar, Sallust and Tacitus of barbarians meeting Roman armies on the battlefield, and once again there are striking similarities in the way they behave when compared with the barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur*.[44] An extract from Tacitus' fictionalized account of a speech supposedly given by the Roman general Agricola at the battle of Mons Graupius is a perfect demonstration that the Romans saw their 'less civilized' opponents in much the same way as the Icelanders did:

> "hi sunt, quos proximo anno unam legionem furto noctis adgressos clamore debellastis, hi ceterorum Britannorum fugacissimi ideoque tam diu superstites. quo modo silvas saltusque penetrantibus fortissimum quodque animal contra ruere, pavida et inertia ipso agminis sono pellebantur, sic acerrimi Britannorum iam pridem ceciderunt, reliquus est numerus ignavorum et timentium. quos quod tandem invenistis, non restiterunt, sed deprehensi sunt; novissimae res et extremo metu torpor defixere aciem in his vestigiis, in quibus pulchram et spectabilem victoriam ederetis."[45]

> "These are those men who last year, attacking a single legion with a night-time ambush, were vanquished by a battle-cry; they are of all the Britons the most given to flight, and therefore have survived so long. Just as when, penetrating woods and narrow passes, you are rushed upon by the bravest beast, while the terrified and helpless flocks are driven away by a noise, thus the bitterest of the Britons now already are slain, the remaining number is of those who are cowardly and fearful. These men you have at last come upon, not because they have taken a stand, but because they are caught; this new situation and paralysis with extreme fear has fixed their battleline in its place, which you will destroy in an illustrious and outstanding victory."

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[44] Cf. Lönnroth, *European Sources*, pp. 23–4

[45] Tacitus, *Agricola* 34 (ed. Städele, p. 56).

First of all the *Britanni* had previously attacked a Roman legion *furto noctis*, with a deceptive nighttime assault, just as the *Bretar* attempt in *Egils saga*, and similar also to the deceptive attacks of the *Skotar* in *Njáls saga* and the *Skrælingar* in *Eiríks saga rauða*. Although the size of this force is not given the implication of *unam legionem* is that the attacking force significantly outnumbers the Romans, as in all of these examples and others. They are routed by a battle cry alone, just as the *Skrælingar* flee from the bellowing of a bull and Nagli from a brandished weapon. The metaphor of the hunter in the forest compares the Britons with animals, a theme which surfaced in the discussion of clothing in the previous chapter. It also associates them with woods; some attack suddenly out of the woods, while others flee into the woods, which is once again reminiscent of the sagas. The battle at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga* features flight into and attacks from woodland, as do *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Kormáks saga*, while *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* and *Vatnsdæla saga* feature *Skotar* fleeing into woodland. Finally, when the Britons are caught, their extreme fear clouds their judgement, and although the response is different, this too is reminiscent of Nagli's panic-stricken flight, which would have ended in him jumping off a cliff if he had not collapsed from exhaustion first — even though his companions won the battle. The Britons in the *Agricola* stay to face certain death because they too are unable to overcome their fear and think logically.

An illogical approach to battle is the main characteristic of the *Britanni* in the *Agricola*. Tacitus does admire the fact that they are braver than the Gauls, being less accustomed to peace, but describes their approach to battle thus: 'in deposcendis periculis eadem audacia et, ubi advenere in detrectandis eadem formido'.[46] In the description of the battle alluded to at the beginning of the previous quotation, the nighttime ambush, he emphasizes the importance of the wooded and marshy landscape in covering the flight of the Britons and preserving them from total annihilation.[47] This depiction he does not, however extend to all barbarians, writing with more respect of the early German tribes. Tacitus claims that they consider 'scutum reliquisse praecipuum flagitium', and that 'infame in omnem vitam ac probrosum superstitem principi suo ex acie recessisse', while for a general showing more courage than his followers is essential,

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[46] 'In challenging danger the same daring [as the Gauls], but when being repulsed the same terror', Tacitus, *Agricola* 11 (ed. Städele, p. 22).
[47] Tacitus, *Agricola* 26 (ed. Städele, pp. 42–4).

meaning leading by example and fighting in the front line.[48] This saga-like endorsement must, however, be put in its literary context. In the *Germania*, Tacitus is not aiming to emphasize the difficulties faced by his father-in-law in fighting barbarians as in the *Agricola*, but is instead concerned with emphasizing the noble qualities of the Germans in order to shame his own people into moral improvement. The qualities he attributes to the Germans give an impression of the qualities that either are or should be, according to Tacitus, valued in Roman society.[49] As usual, then, the barbarian Other is seen only in the light cast by the primary culture, obscuring its true shape even as it informs our understanding of that primary culture, be it Roman or Icelandic.

Having established that several guiding principles of battles with barbarians can be found in both classical Roman and medieval Icelandic culture, it is time to examine more closely a highly relevant Roman text which may have been available as a source in Iceland in the thirteenth century. In Caesar's account of his invasions of Britain there is an emphasis on the guerrilla tactics used by the Britons. These tactics involve all three of the defining features of barbarians in battle in the *Íslendingasögur*: outnumbering, surprise attacks and flight from pitched battles; once again the landscape, and especially woodland, is instrumental in effecting these tactics. Caesar's initial landing in Britain was discussed in the previous chapter in the context of the weapons the *Britanni* use, though the way the British cavalry isolate small groups of Roman soldiers by exploiting the variations in water depth along the shoreline is also relevant to this discussion. However, as the Romans set up camp and begin to explore the country and gather supplies the British tactics become increasingly devious:

> nam quod omni ex reliquis partibus demesso frumento una pars erat reliqua, suspicati hostes huc nostros esse venturos noctu in silvis delituerant. tum dispersos depositis armis in metendo occupatos subito adorti paucis interfectis reliquos incertis ordinibus perturbaverant, simul equitatu atque essedis circumdederant.[50]

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[48] 'To have abandoned one's shield a special disgrace'; 'to have retired from battle, outliving one's leader, one's whole life is infamous and shameful', Tacitus, *Germania* 6-7, 14 (ed. Städele, pp. 86 and 94).
[49] Harris, *Race and Ethnicity*, p. 22.
[50] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.32 (ed. Seel, pp. 121–2).

> For because grain had been gathered from all other parts, only one place was left, so the enemy, suspecting that we would come there, had hidden by night in the woods. Then while [our soldiers were] scattered and busy harvesting, with their arms laid aside, suddenly attacking and killing a few, throwing the rest of the broken ranks into confusion, cavalry and chariots at the same time had surrounded them.

A small group, caught unprepared and surrounded by a numerous and well-armed enemy that hid overnight in the woods — it would be hard to find a closer parallel in any medieval text than the death of Þórólfr at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga*, except that the *Bretar* there are not on horseback. In this comparison Egill plays the role of Caesar, who sees a cloud of dust in the direction of the skirmish and guesses what has happened, just as Egill sees his brother's flag withdrawing from the other side of the battlefield and, realizing that something must be wrong, rushes to reinforce him. The courageous and perceptive hero of each story is able to outguess and therefore thwart the barbarians to win a victory, but not before the devious ambush has cost some loss of life.

An attack by a large army of Britons on the Roman camp leads to a pitched battle, but in this situation the Britons soon give way and flee, allowing the Romans to chase and kill many of them.[51] This flight from pitched battle is characteristic of barbarians in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*, as it is in the sagas. Another example from Caesar which features both an opportunistic ambush and a cowardly flight occurs when his army returns to the recently pacified Gaul, where three hundred men in two ships become separated from the main army on landing and are attacked:

> Morini, quos Caesar in Britanniam proficiscens pacatos reliquerat, spe praedae adducti primo non ita magno suorum numero circumsteterunt ac, si sese interfici nollent, arma ponere iusserunt. cum illi orbe facto sese defenderent, celeriter ad clamorem hominum circiter milia sex convenerunt. qua re nuntiata Caesar omnem ex castris equitatum suis auxilio misit. interim nostri milites impetum hostium sustinuerunt atque amplius horis quattuor fortissime pugnaverunt et paucis vulneribus acceptis complures ex iis occiderunt. postea vero, quam

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[51] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.35 (ed. Seel, p. 123).

> equitatus noster in conspectum venit, hostes abiectis armis terga verterunt magnusque eorum numerus est occisus.[52]
>
> The Morini, who Caesar in departing for Britain had left pacified, in the hope of plunder gathering first in not such a great number, surrounded [the three hundred Roman soldiers] and ordered them, if they did not wish to be killed, to lay down their arms. When they, making a circle, defended themselves, to the battle-clamor quickly converged almost six thousand men. This affair being reported, Caesar sent all his auxiliary cavalry from the camp. Meanwhile our soldiers held off the enemy attack and fought bravely for more than four hours, and receiving few wounds themselves killed a good number of the others. Afterwards, indeed, when our cavalry came into sight, the enemy fled, throwing down their arms, and a great number of them were killed.

Though not technically an ambush, there is both opportunism and treachery in this attack, and a vast difference in numbers. However, the courage and determination of the Romans allows them to hold off the enemy attack with little loss on their own side, much like the Norse ships that come under attack on the coast of *Írland*, and in Vínland in *Grœnlendinga saga*.[53] In *Eiríks saga rauða* although the Norsemen do not hold their ground indefinitely, they are in a very similar situation and in the aftermath of the battle the analysis of their losses is much like Caesar's: 'Tveir menn fellu af þeim Karlsefni, en fjǫlði af þeim Skrælingum. Urðu þeir Karlsefni ofrliði bornir'.[54] The betrayal of a prior agreement brings to mind the description of the death of Þórsteinn *rauði* in the opening chapters of *Eiríks saga rauða* and *Laxdæla saga*, both of which claim that he was killed after the *Skotar* broke an agreement with him.[55] These parallels with *Eiríks saga* are

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[52] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.37 (ed. Seel, p. 124).

[53] A comparison might also be made with a battle between *Skotar* and *Norðmenn* in *Orkneyinga saga* in which the larger force of *Skotar* attacks the *Norðmenn* fiercely, but make no headway and then flee when the *Norðmenn* counterattack, and similarly in three battles in a later chapter, one of which ends with the *Skotar* fleeing into woodland, *Orkneyinga saga*, chs. 10, 20 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 22–3 and 43–52).

[54] 'Two of Karlsefni's men fell, and a multitude of the *Skrælingar*. It had happened that Karlsefni's men held off an overwhelming force', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 229–30).

[55] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 195–6); *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 4 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 6–8); see discussion on Character in next chapter.

especially apt considering the similarities highlighted in the previous chapter with Caesar's account of the invasion of Britain, and considering that the *einfætingr* in the saga is clear proof of learned influences on the text.[56] Finally, the flight at first sight of the Roman cavalry echoes Nagli's flight in *Eyrbyggja saga*, and also the *Skotar* who are attacking Þorkell in *Vatnsdœla saga*. When, the next day, the Romans go to resolve things with the Morini, they find that the marshes which the Morini had formerly hidden in are dried up, so they are forced to submit; another tribe, however, hides in dense woodland, so the Romans destroy their crops and burn their houses. Once again the landscape is the refuge and ally of the barbarians in their cowardice, as it is for the *Skotar* when they are raided in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Using the landscape, especially woods, to attack from and flee into features again in the next book of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*, when the Romans return to Britain for a more serious invasion. The sight of the huge Roman fleet arriving terrifies the Britons, causing them to flee from the shoreline and take refuge using various natural features including high ground, a river and then woodland:

> repulsi ab equitatu se in silvas abdiderunt, locum nacti egregie et natura et opere munitum […] ipsi ex silvis rari propugnabant nostrosque intra munitiones ingredi prohibebant. at milites legionis septimae testudine facta et aggere ad munitiones adiecto locum ceperunt eosque ex silvis expulerunt paucis vulneribus acceptis.[57]

> Driven back by the cavalry they hid themselves in the woods, reaching a place fortified excellently by nature and human fortifications […] they fought back out of the woods in small groups and prevented our men from penetrating the fortifications. But the soldiers of the Seventh Legion made a 'tortoise' and, raising up earth mounds against the ramparts, they captured the place and drove them from the woods, receiving only a few wounds.

Here tactical use of woodland combines with another reference to minimal casualties on the Roman side, another theme of battles which is shared with the *Íslendingasögur*. In

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[56] See chapter on Material Culture and also introductory section on Latin Learning.
[57] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.9 (ed. Seel, p. 134).

terms of minimizing casualties the use of the *testudo* is interesting for the way this defensive technique, which relies on superior armour as well as organization to dismiss the arrows and spears of the barbarians, resembles the tactics used by the vikings in the two battles where they defend ships against a hail of missiles, in *Grœnlendinga saga* and *Laxdæla saga*. In both cases cooperation and the superior armour of the warriors from the primary culture allows them to outfight vast numbers of less organized and more individualistic fighters from the Other culture, with few casualties on the one side and many on the other.

Two final examples from the *Bellum Gallicum* further emphasize the use by the Britons of woodland, both to flee into and to attack out of.

> ita tamen ut nostri omnibus partibus superiores fuerint atque eos in silvas collesque compulerint […] at illi intermisso spatio, imprudentibus nostris atque occupatis in munitione castrorum, subito se ex silvis eiecerunt impetuque in eos facto, qui erant in statione pro castris conlocati, acriter pugnaverunt.[58]

> However, it was such that our men were superior everywhere and forced them into the woods and hills […] but they, leaving off for a while, when our unsuspecting men were busy fortifying the camp, suddenly flung themselves out of the woods, and making an attack on those who had been placed as pickets for the camp, they fought fiercely.

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> Cassivellaunus ut supra demonstravimus omni deposita spe contentionis, dimissis amplioribus copiis, milibus circiter quattuor essedariorum relictis itinera nostra servabat paulumque ex via excedebat locisque impeditis ac silvestribus se occultabat […] cum equitatus noster liberius praedandi vastandique causa se in agros effunderet, omnibus viis semitisque notis essedarios ex silvis emittebat.[59]

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[58] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.15 (ed. Seel, pp. 138–9).
[59] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.19 (ed. Seel, p. 141).

> Cassivellaunus, as mentioned before, having given up all hope of a contest, dismissed the majority of his troops, with about four thousand charioteers remaining, watched our march and withdrew a little from the route, and hid himself in inaccessible and wooded places […] when our cavalry had spread themselves out in the fields to more freely loot and destroy, he sent out charioteers from the woods by every known road and path.

This theme recurs so often in Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* that a medieval Icelander would not have needed access to more than a folio or two of the work to form an impression about the way the early Britons and Gauls fought in the face of a more advanced invader. For comparison, a *finnskr* army in Snorri Sturluson's *Ólafs saga helga* fights in exactly the same way, first fleeing into woodland, but then ambushing the king's army when he travels through the woods, causing many casualties while being themselves protected by the trees.[60] However, though it is possible that Caesar was a model for some of the Icelandic descriptions of barbarians using the landscape to their advantage in battle, there are other possible explanations for the striking similarities. Firstly the 'barbarian' in both these descriptions of conflict is the victim of external aggression and therefore fighting on home soil, in a landscape which they know but their invaders do not. In this situation it is inevitable that to the Romans and Icelanders their opponents would seem to be taking undue advantage of the landscape to both cause and escape harm.

However, there may also be a more fundamental bias at work, relating to the barbarian attitude to food and material culture, an assumption that they are closer to nature in every way (and therefore further from civilization).[61] Woods in particular have a primeval association, being undomesticated and in folk traditions often places of danger; in medieval Iceland the severest sentence of outlawry, *skóggangr*, suggests the association of woodland as being beyond the boundary of civilized society.[62] Using landscape in battle may be a good military tactic, but apart from the accusations of cowardice it is bound to prompt, it also reveals a connection to the landscape which is itself a proof of barbarism, especially when that landscape is an untamed and wild one, as it must be to be inhabited by barbarians, who, almost by definition, are not cultivators.[63] It is therefore

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[60] *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 9 (*Heimskringla II*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 10–1).
[61] Hastrup, *Culture and History*, pp. 136–7.
[62] 'Forest-going', Hastrup, *Culture and History*, p. 137.
[63] See Chapter One on diet and food production.

possible, even likely, that wider truths about human behaviour were separately inspiring both Caesar and the authors of the sagas when they wrote. This is in itself a fascinating prospect for contextualizing the way the Icelanders saw themselves and their ancestors in relation to the peoples around them, if their worldview could have so much in common with the worldview of the technologically advanced Romans with their vast empire.

Nonetheless, knowing that the medieval Icelanders were learned in, and aspired towards, Roman literary culture, as was discussed in the introduction, it is likely that they would have turned to Latin texts to further inform their worldview. Caesar may have been available to them; certainly Sallust was, and though his descriptions of battles in North Africa are not quite as relentlessly repetitive as Caesar's, there are plenty of examples of the same themes. When it comes to fighting the Numidians and their wily king Jugurtha, the Romans are constantly confused by an enemy that appears to retreat and then launches surprise attacks, or attacks with ranged weapons only and will not let them close for a proper fight, as well as using even less honourable tactics:

> At Iugurtha cognita uanitate atque inperitia legati subdole eius augere amentiam, missitare supplicantis legatos, ipse quasi uitabundus per saltuosa loca et tramites exercitum ductare. Denique Aulum spe pactionis perpulit, uti relicto Suthule in abditas regiones sese ueluti cedentem insequeretur [ita delicta occultiora fuere]. Interea per homines callidos diu noctuque exercitum temptabat, centuriones ducesque turmarum partim uti transfugerent corrumpere, alii signo dato locum uti desererent. Quae postquam ex sententia instruit, intempesta nocte de inprouiso multitudine Numidarum Auli castra circumuenit.[64]

> But Jugurtha, knowing the vanity and inexperience of the legate, slyly augmented his madness by sending appeasing envoys; himself, as if taking evasive action, leading his army through wooded terrain and footpaths. At last, with the hope of an agreement, he compelled Aulus into leaving Suthul, such that he followed the simulated withdrawal into remote regions (that the misdeed be more secret). Meanwhile through crafty men he tempted the army day and night, bribing some centurions and squadron leaders to defect, others to abandon their posts at a given signal. Afterwards, these things arranged to his purpose, at

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[64] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 38.1–4 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 88).

> dead of night he unexpectedly surrounded Aulus' camp with a multitude of Numidians.

The treachery and deception in advance of the battle will be discussed in the next chapter, but what is interesting for the present discussion is yet another example of an enemy army withdrawing into wooded and difficult countryside, before making a surprise nighttime assault on the unsuspecting Roman army, which surrenders in ignominy as a result. Even when the Romans are prepared for a pitched battle, the way the Numidians use ranged weapons to attack them from all sides makes the fighting difficult for them:

> Numidae alii postremos caedere, pars a sinistra ac dextra temptare, infensi adesse atque instare, omnibus locis Romanorum ordines conturbare. Quorum etiam qui firmioribus animis obuii hostibus fuerant, ludificati incerto proelio ipsi modo eminus sauciabantur neque contra feriundi aut conserundi manum copia erat.[65]

> Some of the Numidians struck the rear, some tested the left and right, worrying and pursuing in a bitterly hostile manner, confusing the Roman ranks on every side. For even those who were with a firm spirit hostile to the enemy, being toyed with by this variable style of battle, were wounded from a distance, and there was no striking back or engaging with the troops at close hand.

Rómverja saga includes versions of these passages in both manuscripts. Chapters 4 and 10 of AM 595 and Chapters 13 and 16 of AM 226 translate these episodes into Old Icelandic almost word for word, though the second passage is abbreviated in AM 226. There is the same imagery of a retreat into woodland followed by a treacherous surprise attack, and of being attacked from a distance by an enemy that cannot be engaged in close combat, our first indisputable example of Roman-barbarian warfare in Old Norse.[66] Like the examples from Caesar, in the nighttime attack and the use of woodland to retreat

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[65] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 50.4 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 104).
[66] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, chs. 13 and 16; AM 595, chs. 4 and 10 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 42–3 and 63).

into and attack from there are obvious parallels with the behaviour of the *Skotar* and *Bretar* at Vínheiðr in *Egils saga*. The noncommittal use of ranged weapons to inflict damage from a distance without endangering themselves brings to mind the tactics of the *Skrælingar* and *Írar* in various sagas, while the attack on the rear of the army is reminiscent of the *Skotar* in *Njáls saga*. Jugurtha continues to employ similar tactics, with an emphasis on nighttime attacks and tactical retreats into the terrain:

> Tamen ex copia quod optumum uidebatur consilium capit: exercitum plerumque in isdem locis opperiri iubet, ipse cum delectis equitibus Metellum sequitur, nocturnis et auiis itineribus ignoratus Romanos palantis repente adgreditur. Eorum plerique inermes cadunt, multi capiuntur, nemo omnium intactus profugit; et Numidae, prius quam ex castris subueniretur, sicuti iussi erant, in proxumos collis discedunt.[67]

> Still he took the counsel which seemed best to him from his means: he ordered the greater part of the army to wait in the same place; he himself followed Metellus with specially chosen horsemen, travelling by night on remote paths, and attacked suddenly some unsuspecting and scattered Romans. Of these most were slain unarmed, many were captured, not one of them all escaped unhurt; the Numidians, before anyone could come to help from the camp, withdrew to the nearest hills just as they had been ordered.

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> Modo se Metello, interdum Mario ostendere, postremos in agmine temptare, ac statim in collis regredi, rursus aliis minitari, neque proelium facere, neque otium pati, tantummodo hostem ab incepto retinere.[68]

> They revealed themselves now to Metellus, now to Marius, to worry the rear of the column and immediately retreat to the hills, returning to threaten the others,

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[67] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 54.9–10 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 110).
[68] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 55.8 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 112).

> not to make battle, but not allowing any rest, merely keeping the enemy from their purpose.

AM 595 of *Rómverja saga* includes these passages too in an accurate translation, and though the first is passed over in AM 226, the second is translated closely, with the addition of a telling additional pair of clauses which makes the translation worthy of a closer look:

> Stundum liop hann aa Metellum. enn stundum á Marium. stundum aa þa er eptir varo. Enn þegar vid þeim var snuíz. þa flydu þeir. þuiat þeir varo sua skiotir. at enginn hundr ne madr tok þa.[69]

> Sometimes he attacked Metellus, and other times Marius, attacking the rear of the armies. But when the army turned back, then they fled, because they were so fast that no dog or man could catch them.

This final phrase, describing their flight as faster than dogs or men, in going beyond the original text seems to show an Icelandic attitude to barbarians which is based on but developed beyond Sallust's own words. Making the Numidians fast enough for comparison with hunted animals dehumanizes them, rather like Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða*, who are faster than deer. There is an engagement with the Roman text which goes beyond inspiration or imitation, and shows a thoughtful and deliberate rendering of the scene into a context of animal comparison which must have had meaning for an Icelandic reader; this in itself is interesting as there is no evidence for Icelanders hunting with dogs or using them in battle, so this idea must have come from abroad, either by text or direct experience. One potential source for this is a pair of hunting metaphors (one involving dogs and deer and one a boar hunt) in Walter de Châtillon's *Alexandreis*, when Alexander is pursuing Darius, which are simplified in *Alexanders saga* to 'leitar at komaz firir hann sem hundr firir hiorto'.[70] There are no animal-barbarian comparisons in battles in the *Íslendingasögur*, but what this shows

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[69] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 17 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 71).
[70] *Alexandreis* 3.454–8 (ed. Colker, p. 85); 'Seeks to come upon him as dog upon deer', *Alexanders saga*, ch. 53 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 53).

clearly is that medieval Icelandic writers were capable of taking inspiration from Roman sources and then adapting these ideas into their own writing.

In the *Íslendingasögur* the tactic of running and then turning and fighting for a little while to gain an advantage is used at times, including twice in *Kormáks saga*, once in *Írland* and arguably in *Skotland* too. More often, however, barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* simply run, melting away into the woods and hills, and the same is true of the barbarians in Sallust's text also:

> Numidae tantummodo remorati, dum in elephantis auxilium putant, postquam eos inpeditos ramis arborum atque ita disiectos circumueniri uident, fugam faciunt ac plerique abiectis armis collis aut noctis, quae iam aderat, auxilio integri abeunt.[71]

> The Numidians delayed only while they believed they were supported by the elephants, and after they saw the elephants impeded by branches and trees and thus separated and surrounded, they took flight, and most, throwing down their weapons, escaped unharmed with the help of the hills and the night, which now arrived.

Rómverja saga faithfully repeats this episode, with AM 595 following the Latin closely, including imagery of throwing down weapons and fleeing to safety, while AM 226 concentrates on the elephants, again betraying the interest of the creator of AM 226 in his material and his willingness to pick out details of more interest to his audience and emphasize them.[72] On other occasions the Numidians also flee as soon as the Romans are able to outnumber or outmanoeuvre them, even to the point of abandoning their king Jugurtha.[73] In *Alexanders saga* the king of the *Serkir*, Darius, is also abandoned when 'þeir er hann treystez bezt taka nv flyia', suffers an injury, and 'leggr nu áflotta oc rennr með útignom monnum þat er beinst var vm fioll oc scoga', reduced to flight through woodland with the least of his soldiers.[74] This would surely have been anathema to an

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[71] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 53.3 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 108).
[72] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 16; AM 595, ch. 11 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 67).
[73] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 56.6, 101.8 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, pp. 112 and 172); *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, chs. 13 and 31 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 73 and 144).
[74] 'Those whom he trusted most take to flight'; 'takes to flight and runs with common men who were on foot by mountain and wood', *Alexanders saga*, ch. 43 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 43–4).

Icelandic audience raised on stories of heroic and glorious deaths of kings and their followers at last stands such as that of Haraldr *harðráði* at Stamford Bridge and Magnús *berfœttr* in Ireland.[75] On one occasion just an unexpected noise of trumpets and war cries is enough to terrify a barbarian army which had, only an hour earlier, been celebrating a victory over the Romans:

> Deinde, ubi lux aduentabat, defessis iam hostibus ac paulo ante somno captis, de inproviso uigiles, item cohortium turmarum legionum tubicines simul omnis signa canere, milites clamorem tollere atque portis erumpere iubet. Mauri atque Gaetuli, ignoto et horribili sonitu repente exciti, neque fugere neque arma capere neque omnino facere aut prouidere quicquam poterant: ita cunctos strepitu clamore, nullo subueniente, nostris instantibus, tumultu formidine terrore quasi uecordia ceperat. Denique omnes fusi fugatique arma et signa militaria pleraque capta, pluresque eo proelio quam omnibus superioribus interempti. Nam somno et metu insolito inpedita fuga.[76]
>
> Then, when daylight arrived, with the enemy now exhausted and recently seized by sleep, suddenly, as commanded, the sentries and also the trumpeters of the cohorts of cavalry and legionaries all together sounded the signal; the soldiers raised a shout and burst out of the gates. The Moors and Gaetulians, suddenly roused by this strange and terrifying sound, were able neither to flee, nor to seize arms, nor to do anything or make any provision: the result was, with all the noise and clamour, no one coming to help, our men pressing them, the tumult, fear, and terror as if seized in a frenzy. Finally all were routed and put to flight, most of the weapons and military standards captured, and more killed in that battle than all the previous ones. For sleep and their exceptional fear hindered their flight.

The stupefying panic brought on by the sudden shouting and trumpeting of the Roman soldiers is similar to the irrational behaviour of the *skrælings* when suddenly confronted

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[75] Cf. *Ljósvetninga saga*, ch. 31 (ed. Björn Sigfússon, pp. 103–4); *Magnúss saga Berfœtts*, chs. 24–5 (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 234–7).

[76] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 99.1–3 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, pp. 168–70); *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 30 translates this passage closely (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 139–40).

by bellowing bulls and bare-breasted women, and to Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga* when he comes face-to-face with armed opponents.[77] A couple of broader generalizations about the tendency of North African barbarians to flee are made by Sallust and picked up by his Icelandic translator:

> At ille sese in loca saltuosa et natura munita receperat ibique cogebat exercitum numero hominum ampliorem, sed hebetem infirmumque, agri ac pecoris magis quam belli cultorem. Id ea gratia eueniebat quod praeter regios equites nemo omnium Numida ex fuga regem sequitur; quo quoiusque animus fert, eo discedunt neque id flagitium militiae ducitur: ita se mores habent.[78]
>
> Meanwhile he himself [Jugurtha] had retired to a wooded and naturally fortified area, and there was gathering an army with a greater number of men, but ineffective and weak, having more interest in fields and flocks than war. This came about because except the royal cavalry no one of all the Numidians follows the king after a rout; each scatters wherever his mind takes him, and it is not regarded as a military disgrace: these are the customs they have.
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> ___
>
> Hann hafði farið i þa staði er skogar uoru mikklir ok illt til soknar ok yfer farar. Jugurtha hafði þar her mikinn að fiǫlða ok illan til orrosto. þuiat folkið hafði flyið or orrostum. huerer til sinna hǽimila. En það æina með konunginum en hans lið uar handgengið ok að ak uerka lyðr ok þorparar. hafði hann siðan það lið að ser dregið. Ekki þikker það skamm i þæira landi þo að menn flyi or orrosto.[79]
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> He had travelled to a place that was heavily wooded and difficult to attack and journey through. Jugurtha had there a large and numerous army but not good for battle, because people had fled from the battle, each to their own home. And

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[77] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 192–3; Wolf, 'Amazons in Vínland', pp. 482–5; see discussion in clothing section of Material Culture chapter.
[78] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 54.3–4 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 108).
[79] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 12 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 69).

> so the king had only, apart from his sworn followers, drafted farmworkers and crofters. After that he had gathered to himself this army. They do not consider it a shame in their country when men flee from battle.

The addition of *i þæira landi* in the *Rómverja saga* version demonstrates that the writer of AM 595 is not simply translating, but is engaging with Sallust's text and tailoring it ever so slightly to an Icelandic audience. It strengthens the implied criticism of Sallust's comment 'neque id flagitium militiae ducitur: ita se mores habent' by making it clearer that these are customs which are acceptable in *their country*, and therefore not, by implication, in the countries of either Sallust or his Icelandic translator. The tone is perhaps incredulous, perhaps damning, quite possibly both, and certainly negative. More conclusive is the following brief comment on Numidian conduct in battle, given here with matching extracts from both versions of *Rómverja saga*:

> dein proelium incipitur. Qua in parte rex pugnae adfuit, ibi aliquamdiu certatum, ceteri eius omnes milites primo congressu pulsi fugatique. Romani signorum et armorum aliquanto numero, hostium paucorum potiti; nam ferme Numidis in omnibus proeliis magis pedes quam arma tutata sunt.[80]

> Then the battle began. In whichever part of the battle the king was present, there for a while was a struggle, but all the rest of his soldiers were defeated and routed at the first engagement. The Romans captured quite a number of standards and arms, but few of the enemy soldiers; for almost always the Numidians in all battles are protected more by their feet than their weapons.

> ——

> ok þa hofz orrosta. Sv fylking er konunginum fylger tekr þegar að flyja. ok sua aðrar suæiter. Rom ueriar toku her merki ok uapn ok nakkvra menn. flyði ok konungr sem aðrer þuiat i allum orrostum træystuz Numidie menn betr fotum en uapnum.[81]

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[80] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 74.3 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 134).
[81] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 19 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 99).

> And then they had a battle. That battalion which was following the king immediately took to flight, and then the other detachments. The Romans captured here standards and weapons and a few men. The king fled like the others, because in all battles the Numidians trust their feet better than their weapons.
>
> ——
>
> tekz þar orrosta hín snarpazta. ok su fylkíng sem Iugurtha hafdi. tok val vid. enn allír adrir flydu. Enn er konungr ser þetta. þa flyr hann. ok treystuz Numidie meir fotum. enn vapnum.[82]
>
> The harshest battle began then. And that battalion which Jugurtha had sustained it well. But all the others fled. And when the king sees this, then he flees. And the Numidians trust more their feet than weapons.

There is some variation in these two Icelandic versions, depending on whether the author of each thought the soldiers near the king stood fast for a while or not, but interestingly both differ from the Latin in describing the flight of the king with his soldiers. In Sallust's version Jugurtha is let down by his soldiers, but in *Rómverja saga* he behaves in the same way as the other Numidians, with no more concern for his honour than the rest. It can be assumed that this represents an Icelandic attitude about these remote (from an Icelandic point of view) barbarians and their king affecting the way Sallust's text is adapted into Old Norse. The final clause survives intact in all three, and it is telling that a statement of judgement of this type appears here in 226, which particularly at this stage of the narrative is heavily abbreviated and mostly sticks to summarizing the major events of the war. However, considering the portrayal of *Skrælingar* and *Skotar* in the *Íslendingasögur*, it is not surprising that a witty and pithy phrase about a barbarian predilection for flight over fighting resonated with a medieval Icelandic audience. Encountering this attitude, which was in all probability already current and popular in

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[82] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 22 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 99).

Icelandic thought, in such an ancient and august source would only have encouraged its repetition and application in their own works.

Adaptation of a foreign description of battle for an Icelandic audience also occurs in *Breta sögur*, the Icelandic version of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *De gestis Britonum*.[83] The author of the *Hauksbók* version of *Breta sögur* is not entirely consistent in assigning less honourable battle tactics to specific peoples, perhaps because he is working from a source which does not seem to consider ambushes to be dishonourable, but he does make distinctive changes. For example, in Geoffrey's Latin work a British leader, Belinus, sets an ambush for the Romans, who, arriving in the designated spot and seeing the weapons of the Britons glittering around them, panic and run, much like Nagli in *Eyrbyggja saga*, except that they are mostly caught and killed.[84] In *Breta sögur*, however, the focus on the *Bretar* as the protagonists and the Romans as antagonists causes the author to twist the narrative, so that it is the Romans who attempt to set an ambush; Belinus becomes aware of this and foils it with a nighttime march, though he honourably waits until daybreak before attacking the Romans and routing them.[85] Similarly, a description of King Arthur fighting with guerrilla warfare, fleeing into woods and narrow defiles and then counter-attacking suddenly, in *De gestis Britonum* is adapted in *Breta sögur* so that no reference to this tactic is made, describing simply a pursuit followed by a battle.[86]

However, when later in the text the Britons come to fight Saxons instead the author of *Breta sögur* changes allegiance and adapts the text to portray the *Saxar* more favourably than the *Bretar*. *De gestis Britonum* describes the *Saxones* planning a concealed assault to take the *Britones* unawares, but their positively portrayed leader Aurelius sees through it and forces the *Saxones* to engage in open battle, though he himself takes the precaution of placing some forces in woods to cut off any retreat.[87] In *Breta sögur* the *Saxar* do not plot any surprise attack, though there is reference to the *Bretar* attacking them 'i opna skiolldv', just like in *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga*.[88] Finally, when Arthur defeats the *Saxar* in *De gestis Britonum* they flee 'aliquando occulta nemorum, aliquando montes et

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[83] Cf. Baccianti, 'Translating England', pp. 564–5.
[84] *De gestis Britonum* 3.43 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, p. 57).
[85] *Breta sögur*, ch. 16 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 256).
[86] *De gestis Britonum* 10.145–56 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, pp. 229–31); *Breta sögur*, ch. 40 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 292).
[87] *De gestis Britonum* 8.87–93 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, p. 165).
[88] 'On their unguarded side', *Breta sögur*, ch. 30 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 284).

cauernas montium'.[89] In *Hauksbók* however the *Saxar* simply flee to their ships, like viking raiders would.[90] The author of *Breta sögur* seems to deliberately remove 'barbaric' elements of the warfare of first the *Bretar* when they fight against the *Rumverir*, and then the *Saxar* when they fight against the *Bretar*. This contradiction may be the result of assuming that heroic leaders such as Arthur and Belinus could not be celebrated for fighting in the 'dishonourable' way *De gestis Britonum* says they did, and also that the *Saxar*, with their cultural links to the Icelanders in terms of language and through their positive relationship with *England*, could not have fought like barbarians.[91]

To return momentarily to Hǫskuldr *Hvítanessgoði* and the Njálssons by way of a conclusion, it is important to emphasize again that 'civilized' people in these sources also use advantages of surprise, of numbers, and of terrain in battle, and even on occasion run or retreat from battle.[92] However, when they do, especially in the sagas, there is usually a negative association with these actions, and usually the hero (or heroes) overcome their assailants despite these disadvantages, or at least win greater renown for their deed. Those who use such advantages, whether victorious or not, invariably suffer a loss in reputation as a result. In meetings with the barbarian Other the Icelander is always the heroic protagonist, so it always falls to the barbarians to use other advantages to make the contest sufficiently interesting and challenging for the audience to enjoy the saga and for the hero to improve his reputation in the battle. As a result the barbarian inevitably takes on the role of the antagonist, with the characteristics that accompany it. It is therefore not true to say that barbarians in battle have nothing in common with Icelanders, but it is true to say that it is the worst characteristics of Icelanders in which the barbarians share.[93] In their diet and their material culture barbarians revealed themselves to be culturally more primitive than the Icelanders, but when it comes to war that inferiority is transferred to a moral plane, where there is not just the comparative better or worse, but also the unconditional Honourable and Dishonourable. This question of morality applies more widely than simply in battle, as the next chapter, on the character of the barbarian in the *Íslendingasögur*, will detail.

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[89] 'Some to hidden forests, others to mountains and mountain caves', *De gestis Britonum* 9.142–4 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, p. 201).
[90] *Breta sögur*, ch. 36 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 288).
[91] On the portrayal of the Saxons in *Breta sögur* see Baccianti, 'Translating England', pp. 574, 578–81.
[92] Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, pp. 107–9.
[93] Cf. Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 106.

CHAPTER FOUR: CHARACTER

It may seem a curious idea to title this final chapter 'Character', when the three previous chapters all clearly dealt with the way non-Norse people are characterized in the *Íslendingasögur*, even if they did not explicitly set out to do so. The diet and material culture of a people, and the way they wage war, do not, in one sense, bear any relation to the behaviour and character of that people. On the other hand, when each of those things is loaded with over a thousand years of associations and implications, it is clear that they cannot have been written into the sagas without intentional bias. For example, to say that someone dresses in animal skins is not in itself a statement on their character, and yet we understand that to a medieval Icelander, as indeed to ourselves, this statement is heavily loaded in cultural and even moral terms. We understand that it is a negative description, even though there is nothing in the statement itself to imply this. The judgement which accompanies the statement is implicit, and will vary depending on the experience, learning, and expectations of the audience.

By contrast, this chapter deals with direct characterization, where individual barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* are described or behave in ways which contribute to the image the audience has of them. The characterization is explicit rather than implicit, but it brings its own problem of interpretation. Where in the earlier chapters there was a potential problem with distinguishing the literary from the historical, here there is often ambiguity about whether a description of an individual has implications for other characters with the same background (and therefore offers a glimpse of a wider stereotype) or whether the author intended it only for that individual.[1] There are far too few examples to draw any statistically sound conclusions, but there are correlations which, as circumstantial evidence, and in the light of the picture built up over the previous chapters, may be significant.

The first description of a character in a saga usually refers to their provenance (and ancestry in the case of Icelanders) and appearance, features which, once again, need not have any associations, either positive or negative. Inevitably, however, there are associations, and these cannot be escaped, being intrinsic to the nature of the character being described (unlike their clothing or diet), as will be discussed. The first section of this chapter will, therefore, deal with physical descriptions of barbarian characters in the

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[1] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 502.

Íslendingasögur. The next defining feature of a character is the language they speak, a feature which (arguably) has less to do with their own character, but a great deal to do with the way other characters relate to them; this will form the second part of this chapter. Thirdly and lastly, the behaviour of barbarian individuals, and what that says about their characters and the portrayal of barbarians in general, will be discussed. Similarities with classical Latin texts will be explored throughout the chapter as they arise.

Appearance

The frequent use of descriptive nicknames, as well as the literary convention of introducing characters with reference to their physical features in the *Íslendingasögur*, demonstrates that medieval saga authors and their audiences considered appearance to be one of the defining features of literary characters. Physical descriptions are given in close association with descriptions of a person's character and behaviour, and often the two seem to be linked.[2] Fair-haired men such as Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi and Kjartan Ólafsson are described as exceptionally handsome, with other attractive physical features including their faces and eyes, and they behave in a consistently heroic and honourable manner.[3] Chestnut-haired men such as Gunnlaugr *ormstungu*, Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld* and Skarphéðinn Njálsson are not described as ugly, and yet all three have ugly features, including Gunnlaugr and Hallfreðr's noses and Skarphéðinn's mouth, and their personalities reflect this, being capable and accomplished, but with a character flaw that parallels the flaw in their appearance and sometimes leads them to cause trouble.[4] Meanwhile lead characters with dark hair and features can be described as handsome, such as Kormákr Ǫgmundsson, but in the case of Egill Skallagrímsson black hair accompanies ugly features, and as with chestnut-haired characters, this type is more likely to cause trouble and make enemies through their own actions, unlike fair-haired

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[2] Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, p. 62.

[3] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 19 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 52–3); *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 28 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 76–7).

[4] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 4 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 59); *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds*, ch. 2 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 141); *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 25 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 70); Almqvist takes a more negative view of these physical characteristics, 'My Name is Guðríðr', p. 22.

characters who tend to attract enemies as a result of other people's envy.[5] In his doctoral thesis Lars Lönnroth argued that this style of portrayal is itself inspired by Latin historiography, as well as by Latin medical tracts which articulated a belief that character and appearance were related to the four 'humours' that were thought to make up a person's disposition (*melancholia*, *cholera*, *sanguis*, *phlegma*).[6]

Jenny Jochens writes that 'the sagas of Icelanders articulate clearly the perceived connection between dark features and Celtic origins as well as a general aversion to such looks', illustrating her argument with numerous references to slaves and characters with *írskr* or Hebridean heritage.[7] However, this argument, by focusing only on characters of foreign descent, does not reveal the whole picture; as the examples above demonstrate, young men of high status could have a variety of hair colours and complexions and still be heroic, even if those with darker hair tend to be more complex, perhaps 'darker', characters. Fair Kjartan and dark Kormákr, both of partially *írskr* descent, show that this variation also occurred in the literature irrespective of the provenance of their parents and ancestors, and was therefore not necessarily an 'ethnic' consideration. Gunnlaugr's high-status father Illugi had the nickname *svarti* ('black'), so hair and skin colour in the *Íslendingasögur* cannot be purely regarded as distinctive of social status either, though it certainly could be associated with it.[8] Nonetheless, Jochens is no doubt correct to assert that *Svartr* as a given name is almost exclusively reserved for slaves and freedmen, and often those with a foreign background, though as the ancestry and origins for slaves is only occasionally given it is often guesswork to assume that the name has any particular bearing on them being *írskr*, *skozkr* or Hebridean.[9] Furthermore, *Kol* ('coal') is used in combination with other name parts in the given names of a number of high-status Icelandic characters, including Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi's brother Kolskeggr, and Þorbjörg 'Kolbrún' in *Fóstbræðra saga*.[10] Finally, so many predominantly honourable characters are introduced only as being large and handsome, with no reference to complexion or hair colour, that it would be unwise to generalize too far about any stereotypes the

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[5] *Kormáks saga*, ch. 2 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 206); *Egils saga*, ch. 31 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 80); Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 261–3; Cole, 'Racial Thinking', p. 35.
[6] Lönnroth, *European Sources*, pp. 21–3.
[7] Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity', p. 88.
[8] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', p. 152; Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 244–5.
[9] Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity', pp. 86–9; Hastrup, *Culture and History*, pp. 107–8.
[10] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 19 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 53); *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 11 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 170).

medieval Icelanders may have had regarding character and appearance, especially with regard to 'ethnic' heritage.[11]

It is, however, worth highlighting an important point made by Jochens, which is the difference between *blár* and *svartr* in descriptions of appearance.[12] *Blár* ('blue-black') is used for black Africans, as in the place-name *Bláland hitt mikla* ('Ethiopia'), and is in any case very rare as a personal descriptor in the *Íslendingasögur*, whereas *svartr* refers to characters who have dark hair and in some cases a dark complexion.[13] This distinction is particularly relevant for the first episode under discussion in this chapter, the description of the *Skrælingar* in *Eiríks saga rauða*:

> Ok ein morgin snimma, er þeir lituðusk um, sá þeir mikinn fjǫlða húðkeipa […] Þá reru þeir í mót ok undruðusk þá, sem fyrir váru, ok gengu á land upp. Þeir váru svartir menn ok illiligir ok hǫfðu illt hár á hǫfði; þeir váru mjǫk eygðir ok breiðir í kinnum.[14]
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> And early one morning, when they looked around, they saw a great multitude of skin-boats […] Then they [the *Skrælingar*] rowed towards them and they wondered, those who were ahead, and went up on to the land. They were dark men and hideous, and had bad hair on their heads; they were big-eyed with wide cheeks.

It should be noted that in the Skálholtsbók version, AM 557 4to, *svartir* is not used in the description, but *smáir* ('short') instead.[15] In either case it is apparent that though the *Skrælingar* are seen as physically distinctive from the Norsemen, they are on the same broad spectrum, since their complexion is described in the same terms as darker Icelandic (and other European) characters. This is despite a medieval Icelandic belief, articulated in the Icelandic geographical work *Leiðarvísir ok borgaskipan* and also suggested by

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[11] Cf. Egill's brother Þórólfr, *Egils saga*, ch. 31 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 80), and Bjǫrn *Hítdælakappa*, *Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa*, ch. 1 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 112).
[12] Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity', p. 81; Wolf, 'Color Blue', pp. 55–78.
[13] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', p. 100.
[14] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 10 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 227).
[15] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 10 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 428); the small stature of the *Skrælingar* is also suggested by the word *Skræling*, which probably implies physical weakness, Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', pp. 21–2.

Historia Norwegie, that Vínland was geographically connected to Africa, either physically or in close proximity to it.[16] This being the case one might have expected an exoticization of the *Skrælingar* in the period between the Vínland expeditions and the writing of the Vínland sagas that could have rendered them *blár*, so it is interesting that they retained the descriptor *svarti*.[17] A broad recognition of a common humanity with the *Skrælingar* is confirmed by an incident that occurs during a battle in *Grænlendinga saga* when Karlsefni notices a tall and handsome individual among the *Skrælingar*, who he takes to be their leader; *Skrælingar* evidently could have features that Norsemen considered handsome.[18] The most detailed description of a *Skræling* individual is also in *Grænlendinga saga*, when an unearthly woman appears in Guðríðr's doorway during a peaceful period of trading. She is short in stature 'ok mjǫk eygð, svá at eigi hafði jafnmikil augu sét í einum mannshausi', like the *Skrælingar* of *Eiríks saga*, but unlike them she is 'ljósjǫrp á hár' and 'fǫlleit', like some of the ambiguous Icelandic characters described above; she also dresses in 'normal' clothing, with a 'svǫrtum námkyrtli', and a 'dregil um hǫfuð'.[19] In other words there is, from a medieval Icelandic perspective, a spectrum of human appearance which the *Skrælingar* are on, if only just; they are not bestial like the trollish *blámaðr* that Búi is forced to fight in *Kjalnesinga saga*.[20]

The *Skrælingar* of *Eiríks saga rauða* are, however, *illiligir* with *illt hár*, and if we add to that Jochens' assertion that being *svartr* was itself often also associated with being ugly, then we are left with the clear impression that the *Skrælingar* are considered to be as physically Other as it is possible for humans to be. *Illt hár* is difficult to translate and hard to guess at, since *illt* translates directly as 'evil', which a hairstyle, however ugly,

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[16] *Historia Norwegie*, ch. 1, says Greenland is *fere contingens Affricanas insulas*, 'almost touching the African islands' (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, p. 55); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant looking', p. 99; Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 80–1.

[17] Barraclough, 'Travel', p. 211; Lindow, 'Supernatural Others', pp. 12–3.

[18] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 263); Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', p. 183; as mentioned in the introductory section on Otherness, this episode has a close parallel in a battle described in *Orkneyinga saga*, when a man described as *meiri ok fríðari* ('larger and handsomer') than his companions is assumed (correctly, as it turns out) by the *Norðmenn* to be the leader of the *Serkir* they are fighting, ch. 88 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 226–8); Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Saracen Sensibilities', p. 234; Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Vinland and Wishful Thinking', pp. 508–9.

[19] 'And big-eyed, such that never had equally large eyes been seen on one human head'; 'light-chestnut in hair'; 'pale-complexioned'; 'dark cloth-tunic'; 'ribbon around her head', *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 262); Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', p. 22; *dregil* is sometimes translated as 'shawl' in this passage, which normalizes it to Icelandic expectations, but there is no reason not to stick with a direct translation, which makes it a ribbon or band around the woman's head; Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', pp. 21–2.

[20] *Kjalnesinga saga*, ch. 15 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 34–7).

can hardly be said to be, and the other alternative, 'bad', is just as vague.[21] One can guess that it implies wild and unkempt hair, which the Icelanders would have considered primitive in comparison to their own well-combed locks; or, simply different hairstyles than the Icelanders were used to, such as scalplocks or mohawks.[22] Certainly it contributes to the othering of the *Skrælingar*, and as with Icelandic characters in other sagas, this physical description sets the tone for their behaviour, which is correspondingly primitive and outlandish.[23]

Correlation between physical appearance and behaviour seems instinctive in certain circumstances, but as with material culture, physical appearance need not in itself have any bearing on behaviour, a belief which our present society strives to emphasize. The medieval Icelanders, however, have their view in common with most of humanity prior to our recent enlightenment, and certainly in common with the Romans. In fact, descriptions of the barbarians of Northern Europe in Caesar and Tacitus are strikingly similar to those of the *Skrælingar* in *Eiríks saga*. Caesar writes that the Britons 'capilloque sunt promisso atque omni parte corporis rasa prater caput et labrum superius'. He adds that in battle they dye themselves a blue colour with woad to achieve an 'horribiles […] adspectu'.[24] The reference to blue woad on the skin of the Britons is also interesting in comparison to *Eiríks saga*, which, as the previous chapters suggested, has a number of similarities with Caesar's account of the invasions of Britain. Although it has been made clear that the *Skrælingar* are not *blár* in complexion, there may be significance in the dual meaning that *blár* seems to have as both 'blue' and 'black' in Old Icelandic, so the fact that Caesar's British barbarians are *caeruleum* ('blue') may be relevant here, either as a direct model for *Eiríks saga*, or in the indirect sense that a blue/black complexion was regarded in both cultures as exotic and indicative of a barbarian people. If this seems far-fetched it is worth considering that in sixteenth- and

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[21] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant looking', pp. 94 and 100.

[22] For archaeological evidence of the importance of combs in Western Norse society cf. Owen and Dalland, *Scar: A Viking Boat Burial*, pp. 86–8 and 115–118; Grieg, 'Viking Antiquities in Scotland', p. 150; Graham-Campbell and Kidd, *Vikings*, p. 141; Owen, *Sea Road*, pp. 46 and 50; compare with hairy/hairless *blámenn* in other saga genres (Cole, 'Racial Thinking', p. 36), and the 'Indialanz manna er hvergi sceðia hare sino' ('Indian men who damage not their hair at all') of *Alexanders saga*, ch. 68 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 67).

[23] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant looking', pp. 91–2, 94–6; see discussion of the *Skræling* reaction to cattle and cattle products in Chapter One, and to iron weapons in comparison to thir own exotic weapons in Chapter Two.

[24] 'Have flowing hair and shave every part of the body save the head and upper lip', 'horrible […] appearance', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 5.14 (ed. O. Seel, p. 138).

seventeenth-century renderings of Inuits and Native Americans they were often described by comparison with the ancient Picts and Britons, both in drawings and with written words, as David Lupher (echoing Stuart Piggott) records with examples from various works: Inuit women were 'painted about the eyes and balls of the cheek with a blue colour like the ancient Britons'; 'The Inhabitants of the great Bretannie have bin in times past as sauvage as those of Virginia' (accompanying an engraving of Picts); 'See but what Caesar reports of us, and Tacitus of those old Germans; they were once as uncivil as they are in Virginia'.[25] In both Caesar and *Eiríks saga* there is an association made between the colour of the barbarians and their ugliness, described in each with the synonyms *illiligir* and *horribiles*; add to this the significance in both of hairstyle as an important physical feature with regard to their Otherness, and the overall impression is one of a striking similarity in the way these texts barbarize the Other.

For Tacitus one noteworthy thing about the appearance of the northern Britons is that 'rutilae Caledoniam habitantium comae, magni artus Germanicum originem adseverant'.[26] The German barbarians he describes in the *Germania* are also distinguished by their striking appearance and curious physical characteristics, and here he goes into more detail:

> Truces et caerulei oculi, rutilae comae, magna corpora et tantum ad impetum valida; laboris atque operum non eadem patientia, minimeque sitim aestumque tolerare, frigora atque inediam caelo solove assueverunt.[27]
>
> Wild and blue eyes, red hair, large bodies and powerful only in attack: not the same endurance of toil and work, and not at all tolerant of thirst and heat; to cold and starvation they are accustomed, from the climate and the soil.

Tacitus also refers on another occasion to the large size of the early Germans, and how surprising it was to Roman observers, reinforcing the idea that barbarians were clearly identifiable by their physical difference from the primary culture.[28] The recurring

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[25] Lupher, *Romans in a New World*, p. 227.
[26] 'The red hair of those living in Caledonia, the large limbs, profess their German origin,' Tacitus, *Agricola* 11 (ed. Städele, p. 20).
[27] Tacitus, *Germania* 4 (ed. Städele, p. 82).
[28] Tacitus, *Germania* 20 (ed. Städele, p. 102).

features of these Roman descriptions of barbarians are the intimidating physiques, either through size or the use of woad, and striking hair. Similarly, the *Skrælingar* are distinguished by their complexion or small size (depending on which manuscript one consults), and also by their hair, so although the details are slightly different, the idea that barbarians are visibly Other is the same in both cultures. Another potential ancient model for the *Skrælingar* that featured in early geographical works is the pygmies, short, dark-haired and swarthy people who were imagined to live in northeastern Asia, an area which Kirsten Seaver argues would have been conceived of as being geographically close to Vínland in medieval Iceland.[29] A medieval comparison might also be made with the depictions of Jews as physically small and, as Richard Cole puts it, 'lacking vitality, or indeed masculinity' in illustrations in the fourteenth-century *Teiknibók* (AM 673a, 4°).[30]

The large stature of the Caledonian northern Britons, according to Tacitus, also brings to mind the *skozkr* character Nagli from *Eyrbyggja saga*, who is introduced as 'mikill maðr ok fóthvatr; hann var skozkr at kyni'.[31] This example is one where the caution urged at the beginning of the chapter must be exercised; because Nagli is a named character with his own distinctive personality, unlike the nameless *Skrælingar*, it is harder to judge which of his characteristics belong to his ethnicity, and which belong to him as an individual. Even though the two ideas are introduced together, it is impossible to say whether this association is deliberate. Nagli's actions are perhaps the best clue for answering the question of how *skozkr* his behaviour is, a subject which will be returned to later in the chapter, but his physical size may possibly suggest something of the Other. On the other hand, heroic Icelandic characters are often introduced as being large in stature; perhaps the point of Nagli's size is simply to emphasize the ridiculousness of his flight from battle (a battle which his comrades will go on to win) by removing any physical excuse he might have had, in which case his Otherness is not represented in his size, as it is for Tacitus' *Caledonii*, but in his character.[32] However, this reading is based on a paper manuscript from the second half of the seventeenth century. In the two surviving medieval manuscripts which cover the same section Nagli is not described as

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[29] Seaver, '"Pygmies" of the Far North', pp. 66–7 and 74–8.
[30] Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 251–3.
[31] 'A large man and fleet of foot; he was of Scottish origin', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18, (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 33).
[32] See discussion in Battle chapter.

being ‘mikill maðr’, but only ‘fothvatur’ (and in one of the manuscripts this is only a possible reading for a lacuna), though all three agree that he was ‘skozkr at kyni’.[33]

One physical point which can be made about Nagli is his great speed, apparently a defining feature of his physicality and character, and one which is associated directly with his size. Caesar makes a similar comment about the *Britanni*, saying that it was impossible to soundly defeat them because ‘celeritate periculum effugerent’, and indeed this was the impression formed of the *Skotar* and *Skrælingar* in battle in the previous chapter.[34] The question there was about that tendency to flee as a cultural feature, whereas here the possibility of barbarians being regarded as physically suited to flight is highlighted. Three named *Skotar* in the *Íslendingasögur*, Nagli, Haki and Hekja, are all explicitly described as being fast by nature, and the nameless barbarians of *Skotland* and Vínland who run to safety seem to exhibit the same ability by their actions. In both Caesar and Sallust the barbarian people also seem to have an unnatural physical ability to run fast that renders pursuing them in a rout largely ineffective, and Sallust’s introductory description of the people of North Africa specifically lists speed among their physical qualities:

> Genus hominum salubri corpore, uelox, patiens laborum; plerosque senectus dissoluit, nisi qui ferro aut bestiis interiere, nam morbus haud saepe quemquam superat; ad hoc malefici generis pluruma animalia.[35]
>
> This race of men are healthy in body, swift, enduring of work; old age destroys most, except those killed by weapon or beast, for disease does not often overcome any of them; there are many kinds of harmful animal there.

Unfortunately the surviving part of the fuller translation, AM 595, does not include the first introduction of the peoples of northern Africa, and AM 226 selectively picks out the details its creator thinks important. It misses the opportunity to describe the physical attributes of the natives given by Sallust, but does pick up on their common causes of death: ‘Þar vrdu flestir menn elli daudir. nema fyrir vapnum deyí ędr dyr drepi. enn

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[33] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Scott, pp. 44–6).
[34] ‘They would escape danger by their speed’, Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.35 (ed. O. Seel, p. 123).
[35] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 17.6 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 60).

sealldan verda menn þar sott daudír.'[36] In both the Latin text and *Rómverja saga* this striking resistance to disease combined with frequent exposure to violence from men and animals suggests the primitive lifestyle of the natives, and makes them more animal-like than the 'civilized' Romans. As was discussed in the previous chapter, one of the manuscripts of *Rómverja saga* paraphrases a Sallustian description of Numidian flight, adding that they 'varo sua skiotir. at enginn hundr ne madr tok þa,' which is echoed in the description of Haki and Hekja being 'dýrum skjótari'.[37] The other being in *Eiríks saga* which is unnaturally fast is the *einfœtingr*, a creature described in the collection known as *Alfræði Íslenzk* as 'skiotir sem dýr', perhaps an indication that the *Alfræði Íslenzk* was a direct source for *Eiríks saga*.[38] Nagli's speed is actually matched against that of fast animals when his companions gallop after him on horseback and are unable to catch up with him, though it is not actually stated that he is faster than the horses, and he does have a headstart. The phrase used to describe Nagli's terror, *varð at gjalti*, also has a bestial association, as the medieval Norwegian instructive work *Konungs Skuggsjá* discusses. According to *Konungs Skuggsjá* this state is a peculiarly *írskr* affliction, brought on by the exposure of young men with no battle experience to the sight and sound of an enemy army shouting battle cries, which causes them to flee into the woods and live there like animals for years, until they begin to physically resemble beasts.[39]

As a further point of comparison, and possible scholarly link between the two periods and schools of literature, the depiction of the *Finnar* in other medieval works emphasizes their great speed, though this is usually attributed to their skill on skis.[40] The *Finnar* were known throughout Europe for their extraordinary speed on skis, with references in the writings of Adam of Bremen and Paul the Deacon, and a description of their skiing prowess over challenging landscapes in Saxo Grammaticus that leads into a passage on

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[36] 'Most men there die of old age, unless slain by weapons or killed by an animal, but seldom do men there die of sickness', *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 7 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 19).

[37] 'Were so fast that no dog or man could catch them', *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 17 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 71); 'faster than deer' (or 'wild animals'), *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223); Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', p. 464; see further discussion of Haki and Hekja's animal comparison in the previous two chapters.

[38] 'Fast as deer', *Alfræði Íslenzk*, vol. 1 (ed. K. Kaalund, p. 35).

[39] 'Became mad with fear', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Mathías Þórðarson, pp. 37–8 and footnote 4 on p. 37); *Konungs Skuggsjá: Speculum Regale* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, pp. 61–2); however, *varð at gjalti* is also used to describe individuals in non-*írskr* contexts, including the Roman emperor Nero in *Veraldar saga* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 53); 'gjalt' on *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*.

[40] Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, p. 120.

finnskr use of magic.[41] In Snorri Sturluson's *Haralds saga ins hárfagra* Haraldr's son Eiríkr meets his wife Gunnhildr when his soldiers rescue her from two *Finnar* who 'kunnu svá vel á skíðum, at ekki má forðask þá, hvártki menn né dýr, en hvatki er þeir skjóta til, þá hœfa þeir'.[42] These *Finnar* are hunters rather than the hunted, and their skills are beyond those of humans. In another passage from *Heimskringla* a man from northern Norway who some say is *finnskr* has his speed described as faster than that of any horse, and in *Magnússona saga* one of Magnús' illegitimate sons from *Írland* races on foot against a mounted Norwegian prince using *írskr* clothing and techniques and comprehensively beats him.[43] Like the Numidians in *Rómverja saga* and Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða*, their physical abilities are compared with those of animals, making these barbarians animal-like themselves.[44]

Language

After assessing a person's appearance and physique, the next marker for identifying them as 'us' or 'them' is the language they speak; indeed, the original Greek 'barbaros' referred to the alien sound of foreign languages.[45] The importance of language in medieval Iceland as a mark of identity and also as a guarantor of legal rights and protections is demonstrated by the medieval Icelandic law text *Grágás*.[46] In *Grágás* a law relating to inheritance distinguishes between several levels of linguistic variation in the legal preference it grants to different groups of people, stating for example that 'ef

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[41] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* V.xiii.1 (ed. Friis-Jensen, p. 350); DeAngelo, 'North and the Depiction of the "Finnar"', p. 274; Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 100.

[42] 'Know how to ski so well, that nothing can escape them, neither man nor beast, and whatever they shoot at, they get', ch. 32 (*Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 135)

[43] *Óláfs saga helga*, ch. 82 (*Heimskringla II*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 120); *Magnússona saga*, ch. 27 (*Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 267–8).

[44] Aalto, 'Alienness in *Heimskringla*', p. 4; cf. Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', p. 264; Cole, 'Racial Thinking', p. 36.

[45] There is an echo of this idea in *Samsons saga fagra*, ch. 6, when a would-be abductor mistakes the meowing of a cat in human form for *írska* (ed. M. Lockley, p. 6); and also in the incoherent ravings of the drunk (or very excited) German character Tyrkir in *Grœnlendinga saga*, ch. 4 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 252); Bartlett, 'Concepts of Race and Ethnicity', pp. 47–9; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 185, 210–12.

[46] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', pp. 149–52.

her andaz utlendr maðr. [af danskri tungo þa scal fe hans biða her erfingia leigo lavst]'.[47] The idea that language was a guarantee of legal rights in other parts of Europe is articulated in *Laxdœla saga* when Óláfr Hǫskuldsson arrives in Ireland and is met by a crowd of litigious locals with an eye for the property on the ship:

> Qrn mælti þá: "Þat hygg ek, at vér hafim ekki góða atkvámu, því at þetta er fjarri hǫfnum þeim eða kaupstǫðum, er útlendir menn skulu hafa frið, því at vér erum nú fjaraðir uppi svá sem hornsíl: ok nær ætla ek þat lǫgum Íra, þótt þeir kalli fé þetta, er vér hǫfum með at fara, með sínum fǫngum, því at heita láta þeir þat vágrek, er minnr er fjarat frá skutstafni" […] En er á líðr daginn, þá drífr ofan mannfjǫlði mikill til strandar. Síðan fara tveir menn á báti til skipsins; þeir spyrja, hverir fyrir ráði skipi þessu. Óláfr mælti ok svarar svá á írsku, sem þeir mæltu til. En er Írar vissu, at þeir váru norrœnir menn, þá beiðask þeir laga, at þeir skyldu ganga frá fé sínu, ok myndi þeim þá ekki gǫrt til auvisla, áðr konungr ætti dóm í þeirra máli. Óláfr kvað þat lǫg vera, ef engi væri túlkr með kaupmǫnnum, — "en ek kann yðr þat með sǫnnu at segja, at þetta eru friðmenn; en þó munum vér eigi upp gefask at óreyndu."[48]

> Qrn spoke then: "I think this, that we have not made a good landing, because this is far from any harbour or trading place where foreign men are allowed peace, and because we are now stranded like a stickleback: and truthfully I expect that by the law of the *Írar*, they will claim this property, which we have with us on the journey, with their power, because they are allowed to call it wreckage, when less than this has ebbed from the stern" […] And when the day drew on, then a great crowd of people rushed to the shore. Then two men went by boat to the ship; they asked, who had command over this ship. Óláfr spoke and answered in *írska*, as they had spoken in the same […] And when the *Írar*

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[47] 'If here dies a foreign man. [of the Danish tongue then shall his property await here an heir interest-free]', *Grágás: Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid I* (ed. Finsen, p. 229); cf. Leonard, *Language, Society and Identity in Early Iceland*, pp. 122–3. See also a discussion of textual variations in another line from the same chapter of *Grágás* that refers to English men and (possibly) the speakers of other foreign languages, whose property can be claimed by their Icelandic host unless that host has previously met in Iceland and acknowledged an heir of the dead man, Dennis, Foote and Perkins, *Laws of Early Iceland*, note. 57, p. 11; Aalto, *Categorizing Otherness*, pp. 75–6; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 190.

[48] *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 21 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 54–5).

> realized that these were Norwegian men, then they demanded according to law, that they should give up their property, and [said] that no harm would be done to them, before the king made a judgement on their case. Óláfr said that was the law, if the merchants had no interpreter with them, — "but I can tell you this with proofs, that these are peaceful men; however we will not surrender without a struggle."

The supposed law on strandings is reminiscent of an episode described in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, when the whole population of Iceland is said to have composed slanderous verses about the king of the Danes because an Icelandic ship was wrecked in Denmark and claimed as *vágrek* by a representative of the king there.[49] The interesting thing about the passage for a discussion of language is the implication that Óláfr's knowledge of *írskr* gave him legal rights in Ireland, in the same way that a foreigner who spoke *dǫnsku tungu* had legal rights in Iceland. However, in practice Óláfr's argument holds little water with the *Írar*, who attempt to claim by force what they were unable to win by legal argument.

The breakdown of communication, both in legal and informal channels, into violence is a common theme in the *Íslendingasögur*, but ultimately feuds in a society as interconnected as that of medieval Iceland can only be resolved through dialogue; if there is a single universal message from the whole corpus then arguably it is this. Time and time again, conflicts escalate because characters resort to violence when a settlement could have resolved the disagreement, and the cycle of violence only ends when the survivors agree to settle — but this only works when the characters are able to communicate in a common language. Óláfr's encounter with the *Írar* is a good example of this: there is communication and a recourse to law which is rejected by one party because they feel they have both the literal and the moral highground. Violence results, and is resolved only when a new party arrives, the *írskr* king Mýrkjartan, who resumes the dialogue, leading to an agreement which is satisfactory to both parties.

Of course there are a number of other themes acting on this scene, including issues of class and behaviour as well as literary tropes regarding the portrayal of the young hero abroad, but the value of dialogue and Óláfr's knowledge of *írska* are arguably the most

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[49] 'Wreckage', *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 33 (*Heimskringla I*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, p. 270).

important.[50] This is emphasized by Mýkjartan's comment when he decides to believe Óláfr's story and grant him and his men peaceful passage to his court: 'Auðsætt er þat á Óláfi þessum, at hann er stórættaðr maðr, hvárt sem hann er várr frændi eða eigi, ok svá þat, at hann mælir allra manna bezt írsku.'[51] Óláfr's knowledge of *írska* in this story is his most essential skill, more important than his courage or his martial prowess. Marianne Kalinke's work on medieval Icelandic romances led her to conclude that 'fluency in foreign languages is perceived in Icelandic romances as the mark both of the learned man and of the ideal hero', and the late-thirteenth-century *Laxdæla saga* seems to owe much to the romance genre.[52] Knowledge of a foreign language has also been identified as a royal characteristic in the saga literature, further demonstrating that the importance of communication was recognized by the medieval Icelanders.[53]

Laying emphasis on the role of the interpreter in restoring peace and order between Norsemen and *Írar* in *Írland* is not unique to *Laxdæla saga*, or even to the saga corpus as a whole. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Guðleifr and his men come closer to harm than Óláfr, as when they land on the *írskr* coast they have no one among them who can speak *írska*. However, the timely arrival of a bilingual minor chieftain, originally from Iceland, preserves them from the threats of the frightening local *Írar*:

> Þeir fengu þar hǫfn góða; ok er þeir hǫfðu þar litla stund við land verit, þá koma menn til fundar við þá; þeir kenndu þar engan mann, en helzt þótti þeim, sem þeir mælti írsku; brátt kom til þeirra svá mikit fjǫlmenni, at þat skipti mǫrgum hundruðum. Þessir menn veittu þeim atgǫngu ok tóku þá hǫndum alla ok bundu ok ráku þá síðan á land upp. Þá váru þeir færðir á mót eitt ok dœmt um þá. Þat skildu þeir, at sumir vildu, at þeir væri drepnir, en sumir vildu, at þeim væri skipt á vistir, ok væri þeir þjáðir. Ok er þetta var kært, sjá þeir, hvar reið flokkr manna, ok var þar borit merki í flokkinum; þóttusk þeir þá vita, at hǫfðingi nǫkkurr myndi vera í flokkinum; ok er flokk þenna bar þangat at, sá þeir, at undir merkinu reið mikill maðr ok garpligr ok var þá mjǫk á efra aldr ok hvítr

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[50] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', pp. 499–500.
[51] 'It is evident of this Óláfr, that he is a nobly descended man, whether he is our relative or not, and also, that he speaks of all men the best *írska*', *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 57 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 57).
[52] Sävborg, 'Kärleken i *Laxdæla saga*', pp. 75–104, especially summary of scholarship pp. 75–6; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Age of the Sturlungs*, p. 42; Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 499; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 210–11.
[53] Kalinke, 'Foreign Language Requirement', pp. 850–8; Townend, *Language and History*, pp. 146–8.

fyrir hærum. Allir menn, er þar váru fyrir, hnigu þeim manni ok fǫgnuðu sem herra sínum; fundu þeir þá brátt, at þangat var skotit ǫllum ráðum ok atkvæðum, sem hann var. Síðan sendi þessi maðr eptir þeim Guðleifi; ok er þeir kómu fyrir þenna mann, þá mælti hann til þeira á norrœnu ok spyrr, hvaðan af lǫndum þeir væri. Þeir sǫgðu, at þeir væri flestir íslenzkir […] Landsmenn kǫlluðu í ǫðrum stað, at nǫkkut ráð skyldi gera fyrir skipshǫfninni. Eptir þat gekk þessi maðr inn mikli í brott frá þeim ok nefndi með sér tólf menn af sínum mǫnnum, ok sátu þeir langa hríð á tali. Eptir þat gengu þeir til mannfundarins. Þá mælti inn mikli maðr til þeira Guðleifs: "Vér landsmenn hǫfum talat nǫkkut um mál yður, ok hafa landsmenn nú gefit yðvart mál á mitt vald, en ek vil nú gefa yðr fararleyfi þangat, sem þér vilið fara; en þó at yðr þykki nú mjǫk á liðit sumar, þá vil ek þó þat ráða yðr, at þér látið á brott héðan, því at hér er fólk ótrútt ok illt viðreignar; en þeim þykkja áðr brotin lǫg á sér."[54]

They found there a good harbour; and when they had been on land for a little while then came men to meet with them; they did not recognize anyone and thought it seemed rather as if they spoke *írska*; suddenly came to them such a great host that it amounted to many hundreds. These men made an attack on them and took all their hands and bound them and forced them up the land. Then they were brought to a meeting and judged there. They understood this, that some wanted that they should be killed, and some that they should be shared between houses and be their slaves. And while this was debated they saw a group of men riding, and a banner carried by the group; they thought they knew that some chieftain must be in the group; and when this group arrived there they saw that under the banner rode a large and martial-looking man, who was a great age and pale with grey hair. All the men who were there from before bowed to this man and greeted him as their lord; they realized immediately that there all counsel and decisions were deferred to him. Later this man sent for Guðleifr and his men; and when they arrived before the man then he spoke to them in Norse and asked what lands they were from. They said that most of them were Icelandic […] The locals called from further away that some decision must be made about the crew. After that the big man went

[54] *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 177–9).

> away from them and called away twelve of his men and they sat in conversation for a long while. After that they went to the gathering. Then the big man spoke to Guðleifr and his men: "We locals have spoken a bit about your case and the locals have given over your case to my authority, and I will now give you leave to go wherever you want to travel; and though you think summer already very advanced I want to counsel you that you sail away from here, because the people here are false and difficult to deal with. And also they think their laws were broken.

The final sentence of the extract seems to echo the example from *Laxdæla saga* in its interpretation of Irish law. Although it is not clear which of their laws the Irish consider to have been broken — it could be that the Norsemen have landed at an unsanctioned site, or it could be that Guðleifr has overstepped his authority in granting the prisoners freedom — or it could be the same law that Óláfr referred to on ship strandings and the requirement that the stranded ship have an *írska* speaker onboard.[55] Given the context it would make sense if the Norsemen have voided their right to land and trade or buy provisions by not having with them anyone capable of speaking *írska*. From a practical perspective, the absence of an interpreter would inevitably lead to more misunderstandings and be perceived as more threatening by the locals, so it would be reasonable if that requirement were enshrined in Irish law (or at least if the author of the saga thought it was). It would also fit with the narrative, where initial friendly contact quickly escalates to violence and distrust when the two groups are unable to communicate with each other, with the Irish arriving in large numbers and taking the Norsemen captive.

The arrival of the bilingual chieftain normalizes the situation again and establishes peace from violence, purely by virtue of his ability to communicate with and between both groups. Like Óláfr he is distinguished by his striking looks, which mark him out from his companions; his looks may reflect his Icelandic heritage as well as his social status, but it is worth noting that for both characters bilingualism is one of several characteristics which mark them out as superior to the men around them. His role in the

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[55] Laws on where Icelanders could land to trade and the cost of erring from this would have had relevance to Icelanders in the fourteenth century, as a similar law was in effect in Norway and at least three Icelandic ships were seized as a result (Rowe, *Development of Flateyjarbók*, pp. 74–5).

episode demonstrates exactly why this ability is so valued: he speaks to Guðleifr and his crew in Icelandic, and then goes aside with twelve of his own men and speaks to them in *írska*. Either because they now have an interpreter to speak for them, or because of the stranger's local influence, the Norsemen are released and given the opportunity to depart in safety from the country. The importance of the stranger's ability to interpret and negotiate between the groups is of critical importance, and sets him at the centre of the drama, with power of life and death over the Norsemen, and power over the *Írar* to deny or grant them the property and slaves they hoped to claim from the ship. The consequences for the travellers had he not been present are reiterated in his farewell message to Guðleifr, when he tells them to warn other Icelanders not to travel to *Írland*, as it is 'in mesta ófœra, nema mǫnnum takisk þann veg giptusamliga um landtǫkuna, sem yðr hefir tekizk; því at hér er land vítt ok illt til hafna, en ráðinn ófriðr alls staðar útlendum mǫnnum, nema svá beri til, sem nú hefir orðit.'[56]

This convenient meeting with an Icelandic-*írskr* chieftain might easily be considered the stuff of fantasy, and indeed the likelihood of encountering an (only slightly distanced) acquaintance from one's local region in Iceland when landing at random on the Irish coast must have been tiny. The basic premise of the story, however, is not so unlikely as it appears, so here once again it is important to make allowances for historical reality, as well as literary convenience and ideological stereotypes about the role of language when encountering the Other. There is little written evidence for Scandinavian activity on the western coast of Ireland, but archaeological evidence suggests that in many areas the coastal fringe of the country may have been settled in part by Scandinavians during the Viking age, and it would have been a natural first landfall for traders heading to Limerick.[57] The material is sparse enough to suggest no major settlement or Norse rule, but rather perhaps cooperation and even integration between a few enterprising foreigners and local Irish society, with the immigrants accepting Irish overlordship in return for peace and the right to settle there. Based on Viking finds along the coast of Connemara, Eamonn Kelly echoes and elaborates on John Sheehan's interpretation of a

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[56] 'The most impassible place unless one fortunately follows the route to land that you have taken, because the land here is wide and poor in harbours, and in every place foreigners will be subject to hostility unless things turn out as they now have done", *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 179).

[57] Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, p. 58; cf. Hrafn Hlymreksfari ('Limerick-farer'), *Landnámabók*, ch. S 122/ H 94 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 162); forthcoming from Etchingham, C., M. Ni Mhaonaigh, E. Rowe, and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson.

burial at Eyrephort in proposing a model in which Scandinavian settlers might have come to hold positions of minor prominence in the local Irish community due to their superior knowledge of fishing and boats, while still accepting the rule of the established Irish elite further inland.[58]

In this context the story in the saga takes on striking new possibilities as representing some degree of historical realism, at least for the eleventh century when Hrafn Hlymreksfari was travelling between Iceland and Ireland. The chieftain, Bjǫrn, might not actually have been from the Snaefellsnes peninsula of Iceland, but he might well have been a bilingual Norseman, integrated into Irish society and with some influence over local politics as a result of his skills and knowledge. Although Bjǫrn is presented in the saga as being locally powerful, it is only the Norsemen who guess that he might actually be a chieftain. The extent to which he has to negotiate with the other locals and an ominous reference to 'ríkari menn en ek, þeir er lítinn frið munu gefa útlendum mǫnnum' suggests that he is of precisely the status described by Kelly, merely a prominent member of the local society.[59] There is arguably even a specific archaeological model for a Scandinavian who could just as well have been Bjǫrn, in a pagan-style grave with a honing stone and fishing weights (suggesting high status and an important role in the local fishing industry) found in a church on High Island, Connemara.[60] If there were indeed many such individuals living in Irish-dominated communities along the western coast of Ireland then their role as interpreters and negotiators could have been of critical importance to both groups when the local Irish population encountered peaceful visiting Norsemen. While this episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* is almost certainly fictional, it may preserve a memory of a genuine practice from the period that would have benefited numerous Icelandic voyagers.

In *Flóamanna saga* an interpreter also resolves a dangerous situation between *Írar* and Icelanders. Two *írskr* women are being abducted following a raid, and the Norsemen have made a successful escape onto their ships, having been pursued by a large band of *Írar*, when a negotiation begins:

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[58] Kelly, 'Vikings in Connemara', p. 184; Sheehan, 'Reassessment of the Viking burial', p. 70.
[59] 'More powerful men than me, who will give little peace to foreign men', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 179).
[60] Kelly, 'Vikings in Connemara', p. 185.

> Nú gekk maðr ór liðinu, því er eptir sótti, ok mælti langt erindi. Þeir skildu eigi hans mál. Þá mælti kvinnan á norrænu ok sagði þeim, at hann vildi upp gefa þat, er þeir höfðu fengit af fénu, — "ef þér látið okkr lausar. Þessi maðr er jarl ok son minn, en ek er víkversk at móðurkyni; munu þér þá ok bezt njóta gripanna, er svá er gert, því at þungi fylgir sverðinu. Son minn heitir Hugi; hann býðr þér, Þorgils, fé heldr en þér takið mik í burtu. Er yðr ok ekki happ í okkr burt at taka." Þorgils hlýðir þeira ráðum ok flytr þær til lands. Hugi jarl gekk með fagnaði á móti Þorgilsi ok gaf honum hring einn, annan móðir hans, mærin inn þriðja, ok mæltu síðan vel fyrir honum.[61]
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> Now a man came out of the host which had pursued them and made a long speech. They did not understand his language. Then the woman spoke in Norse and told them that he would give up what they had captured of treasure, "if you set us free. This man is a jarl and my son, though I am descended from Vík [in Norway] on my mother's side; you will then also get the best use of this treasure, if this is done, because a burden accompanies the sword. My son is called Hugi; he offers you, Þorgils, money rather than that you should take me away. And there will be no good fortune for you in taking us away." Þorgils listened to this counsel and they went ashore. Hugi *jarl* came towards Þorgils in greeting and gave him a ring, his mother [gave] a second, the maiden a third, and then they spoke well of him.

Although the Norsemen seem to hold all the cards at the beginning of the dialogue, entering into negotiations turns out to be profitable for all concerned, as Þorgils learns of the curse on the sword and is given three rings in exchange for the prisoners. More importantly, he makes an ally of the *írskr jarl*, Hugi, which leads to the preservation of his own life later in the saga when Þorgils returns to *Írland*.[62] The lesson is clear: thanks to an interpreter the Icelanders and *Írar* are able to gain a mutual benefit instead of fighting, and the result here as elsewhere is beneficial to both sides, but especially to the Icelanders. Two other examples of interpreter use in Ireland suggest that the importance

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[61] *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 16 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 262–3).
[62] *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 309–10).

of interpreters in these contexts was widely recognized. One is from the Latin *Life of St Findan*, when Findan travels with an interpreter to try and ransom his sister from a group of vikings, and the other is an ambiguous extract from *Gísls þáttr Illugarsonar* when a malicious (or stupid) Norwegian claims to speak *írska* well and offers to interpret for a group of hostages sent to the *írskr* king Mýrkjartan.[63] He endangers the whole group by insulting the king in *írska*, but luckily the king sees through his dishonesty and does not hold the group responsible for the words of their interpreter, though the power that the interpreter has in that situation is clear.[64]

All of these examples concern Norsemen in *Írland*, whether as raiders, with power in their hands, or as traders and therefore at the mercy of the locals. There is, however, one very clear example of language playing a defining role in the characterization and behaviour of an *írskr* character in Iceland. This, of course, is Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, the mother of Óláfr Hǫskuldsson, who is purchased as a slave by Hǫskuldr in the Brenneyjar, off the Swedish coast, and who maintains a pretence of being unable to speak in any language for several years even while living in close proximity to Hǫskuldr and his family in Iceland:

> Hǫskuldr […] bað þá þessi konu virkða ok kvað þat nær sínu skapi, at hon væri heima þar at vistafari. Jórunn mælti: "Eigi mun ek deila við frillu þína, þá er þú hefir flutt af Nóregi, þótt hon kynni eigi góðar návistir, en nú þykki mér þat allra sýnst, ef hon er bæði dauf ok málláus."
> […]
> [Hǫskuldr] heyrði mannamál; hann gekk þangat til, sem lœkr fell fyrir túnbrekkunni; sá hann þar tvá menn ok kenndi; var þar Óláfr, sonr hans, ok móðir hans; fær hann þá skilit at hon var eigi málláus, því at hon talaði þá mart við sveininn. Síðan gekk Hǫskuldr at þeim ok spyrr hana at nafni ok kvað henni ekki mundu stoða at dyljask lengr. Hon kvað svá vera skyldu; setjask þau niðr í túnbrekkuna. Síðan mælti hon: "Ef þú vill nafn mitt vita, þá heiti ek Melkorka." Hǫskuldr bað hana þá segja lengra ætt sína. Hon svarar: "Mýrkjartan heitir faðir minn; hann er konungr á Írlandi. Ek var þaðan

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[63] O' Nolan, *Life of St Findan*, pp. 155-64; Downham, 'Vikings' Settlements', p. 3; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', p. 185.
[64] *Gísls þáttr Illugasonar* (*Biskupa sögur I*, ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson and Foote, pp. 333–4); McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 193 and 217–8.

> hertekin fimmtán vetra gǫmul." Hǫskuldr kvað hana helzti lengi hafa þagat yfir svá góðri ætt […] Eptir þat lét hann Melkorku í brott fara ok fekk henni þar bústað uppi í Laxárdal; þar heitir síðan á Melkorkustǫðum […] Setr Melkorka þar bú saman; fær Hǫskuldr þar til bús allt þat, er hafa þurfti, ok fór Óláfr, sonr þeira, með henni.[65]
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> Hǫskuldr […] ordered that the women be cared for and said it was in accordance with his plan that she should be housed there in the home. Jórunn spoke: "I will not quarrel with your concubine, that you have shipped over from Norway, for she is not accustomed to good company, and indeed I think this clearest of all to me, since she is both deaf and dumb.
> […]
> [Hǫskuldr] heard speech; he went to where a brook flowed in front of the hayfield; he saw there two people and recognized them; there were Óláfr, his son, and Óláfr's mother; he realized then that she was not dumb, as she was now talking a lot with the boy. Then Hǫskuldr went to them and asked her name and told her it would not avail her to dissemble any longer. She said it would be so; they sat down on the edge of the hayfield. Then she spoke: 'If you want to know my name, then I am called Melkorka.' Hǫskuldr asked her to tell him more of her ancestry. She answered: 'My father is called Mýrkjartan; he is a king in Ireland. I was abducted thence when fifteen years old. Hǫskuldr said she had too long kept silent over such a noble ancestry […] After that he allowed Melkorka to go away and gave her a farm further up Laxárdalr; it has since been called Melkorkustaðir […] Melkorka set up household there; Hǫskuldr got her everything she needed there, and their son Óláfr went with her.

When Melkorka first arrives in Iceland, a non-speaking *írskr* woman, she is limited to a position of subservience. Although she is beautiful and carries herself nobly, and despite Hǫskuldr obviously favouring her, she remains a slave under the power of Hǫskuldr's wife Jórunn. Melkorka's apparent inability to communicate is explicitly given as a reason to disregard her by Jórunn, revealing the relationship language has to her low

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[65] *Laxdœla saga*, ch. 13 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 26–8).

status in the household. The importance of language is demonstrated following Hǫskuldr's chance discovery that Melkorka is capable of conversing fluently in both Icelandic and *írska*, and that she is of royal *írskr* descent. These markers of status radically change Melkorka and Óláfr's lives in Iceland.[66]

As Jórunn points out, the household has no way of knowing if Melkorka's claim to being the daughter of an *írskr* king has any truth to it, so the only definite change in her role is that she is now able to communicate freely. Although Jórunn resists, it is clear that through this revelation Melkorka has reached almost equal social status with the free Icelanders, with only the technicality of her bondage setting her apart. Within her own mind too something seems to have changed, for when matters come to a head between her and Jórunn, Melkorka does not hesitate to strike her mistress in the face and make her nose bleed. Hǫskuldr intervenes, but Melkorka is not punished as one might expect of a disobedient slave; instead she is given a farmstead further up the valley to run as her own.

Speaking Icelandic is a key contributor to the dramatic transformation of Melkorka's life in Iceland, raising her from a lowly slave-girl to an independent, property-owning woman, the effective equal of any in Iceland. Ultimately she is even able to negotiate a profitable marriage with another local farmer. Of course Melkorka has other attributes to recommend her to Hǫskuldr's sympathies that might account for the special treatment he shows her, not least their promising son Óláfr, but these she had as much before her change in status as after. It is Melkorka's ability to speak and particularly her command of Icelandic that, in combination with the royal ancestry she uses her speech to claim, is the major influence in changing Hǫskuldr's attitude towards her and allowing him to elevate her socially. The ancestry she claims plays a part in this, but the only provable, material difference is that she has gone from being non-speaking to Norse-speaking, and the fact that she is *írsk* does not now seem to disadvantage her. Haki and Hekja in *Eiríks saga rauða* by comparison never speak; it is never made clear whether this is because they cannot speak the same language as Karlsefni, or because Karlsefni denies them the opportunity by speaking for them when they return form their explorations in Vínland bearing grapes and wheat. Either way, their status as outsiders and slaves is reinforced by their silence.[67]

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[66] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 499.

[67] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 8 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 223).

The lesson, often repeated, is that in an entirely Icelandic context dialogue is essential for maintaining peace and order in society; when dealing with the *Írar* it is more difficult, but with the help of interpreters and bilingual characters, communication is once again portrayed as a valuable tool for improving a situation for both sides. It is worth pointing out here that contact with the people of *England*, with whom, according to *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, the medieval Icelanders believed their ancestors could converse freely with complete mutual intelligibility, is almost always peaceful and constructive in the *Íslendingasögur*.[68] Gunnlaugr and Egill both cooperate with *engelskir* kings to the benefit of all parties, and though Kormákr goes there to raid on one occasion, Icelandic characters are more likely to visit in order to trade, or for religious purposes.[69]

When it comes to more alien peoples, however, communication is harder again, and the prospect of a constructive outcome correspondingly unlikely.[70] This is a distinctive theme of the Vínland sagas, in both of which initial guarded but constructive contact is interrupted by misunderstandings that would have been avoided if the two parties could have communicated in words.[71] In *Eiríks saga rauða* it is stated explicitly that the Norsemen signalled to the *Skrælingar* with their shields as an invitation to trade, after an initial contact in which the *Skrælingar* seemed to signal their peaceful intentions by waving wooden poles in a clockwise direction.[72] As the chapter on diet and food production described, the bellowing of the visitors' bull frightens the *Skrælingar* during

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[68] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 7 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, p. 70); see discussion of mutual intelligibility in Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 3–21; Leonard, '*Language, Society and Identity*', pp. 116–8; Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, pp. 91–2; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 189–90.

[69] To visit kings and noblemen in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 7 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 70–1), *Egils saga*, chs. 50–5 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 128–47), *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 8 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, p. 159); to trade in *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 1 (*Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 137–8), *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch. 13 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 251–3), *Grettis saga*, ch. 22 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, p. 78), *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 41 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 124); for religious purposes in *Heiðarvíga saga*, ch. 12 (*Borgfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 246–7); cf. Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 25–6; Rowe, 'Helpful Danes', p. 12.

[70] Frakes, 'Vikings, Vínland', pp. 183–4.

[71] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Black men and malignant-looking', pp. 90–2; it is interesting to compare this with Columbus' account of exchanging sign language with indigenous people in the Caribbean, in which he makes his own assumptions about the message they are trying to impart based partly on his previous convictions, and in which miscommunication leads to conflict, and also in other accounts of early visits to the Americas, Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 89–104; Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', p. 105.

[72] Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 237–8; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', pp. 93–4; cf. McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 216–7.

trading, and they flee the scene, only to return armed and in force. This is an obvious misunderstanding resulting from an inability to communicate that resulted in the *Skrælingar* feeling that the Norsemen were threatening them, when a few words could have reassured them that this was not the case. Some time later, however, two young *Skrælingar* are captured: 'þeir kenndu þeim mál, ok váru skírðir.' The first priority for the Norsemen is to teach the boys to communicate with them, even before they baptize them into their religion; the value of this is that, having taught the boys to speak Icelandic, they are able to learn from them lots of information about the *Skrælingar* and their land.[73]

In *Grænlendinga saga* the importance of language, the attempts of the two sides to communicate, and the negative consequences of their failure to do so, is even more expressly set out. Once again the bellowing of a bull frightens the *Skrælingar*, who seek to take shelter in Karlsefni's house; Karlsefni has his men use force to keep them out, and in the midst of this chaos the author notes that 'hvárigir skilðu annars mál'.[74] On this occasion the desire to trade outweighs their mutual suspicion, and the two sides settle down to barter peacefully, though Karlsefni takes the precaution of forbidding the sale of weapons, and also of building a sturdy palisade around the farm after the *Skrælingar* have left.[75] On the next visit of the *Skrælingar* there follows a fascinating account of communication, which has been analyzed in detail by Bo Almqvist.[76] The saga tells it thus:

> Hon gekk þar at, er Guðríðr sat, ok mælti: "Hvat heitir þú?" segir hon. "Ek heiti Guðríðr; eða hvert er þitt heiti?" "Ek heiti Guðríðr", segir hon. Þá rétti Guðríðr húsfreyja hǫnd sína til hennar, at hon sæti hjá henni, en þat bar allt saman, at þá heyrði Guðríðr brest mikinn, ok var þá konan horfin, ok í því var ok veginn einn Skrælingr af einum húskarli Karlsefnis, því at hann hafði viljat taka vápn þeira.

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[73] 'They taught them speech, and they were baptized', *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 12 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 233–4); Almqvist considers that this phrasing indicates a disparaging dismissal of their native tongue as not a language at all, 'My Name is Guðríðr', p. 26; Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', p. 108; cf. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 90 and 107.
[74] 'Neither understood the others' language', *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 262); Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference', pp. 465–6.
[75] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 261–2); Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 104–6; Barnes, 'Vínland the Good', p. 91; Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 90.
[76] Almqvist, "My Name is Guðríðr", pp. 15–30.

> Ok fóru nú brott sem tíðast, en klæði þeira lágu þar eptir ok varningr. Engi maðr hafði konu þessa sét, útan Guðríðr ein.[77]
>
> She went to where Guðríðr sat and spoke: "What are you called?" she said. "I am called Guðríðr, and what are you called?" "I am called Guðríðr", she said. Then Guðríðr the house-mistress offered her hand to her, that she should sit beside her, and then it happened all at once, that Guðríðr heard a great crash, and then the woman was gone, and at the same moment also one of the *Skrælingar* was killed by one of Karlsefni's man-servants, because he had wanted to take their weapons. And they went away at once, but their clothes and trade goods they left lying there. No one had seen this woman except only Guðríðr.

While the men are outside trading peacefully, these two women attempt to take the interactions of the two groups to the next level by engaging one another in conversation, as equals, and with no apparent ulterior motive beyond a desire to communicate and to learn each about the other. Almqvist suggests, intriguingly, that a slight scribal error has led to the opening question being attributed to the *Skræling*, when in fact it is more likely that Guðríðr asks the question first, then gives her own name and repeats the question, only to be parroted by the other woman, who simply repeats her answer.[78] It is almost like the first minute of a beginner's language class, and having established a dialogue the Norse Guðríðr feels comfortable enough to invite her visitor to sit down. Unfortunately events outside the house take a turn for the worse, and the avenue which was briefly open to the two sides, of continuing their peaceful interactions for mutual benefit, is lost forever. Conflict results immediately from what is probably a misunderstanding rather than a malicious act by the trader, since, in the absence of mutual intelligibility, the act can only be resolved by violence.[79]

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[77] *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 7 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 262–3).
[78] Almqvist, 'My Name is Guðríðr', pp. 26–8; again comparison can be made with Columbus' diaries, in one of which he notes that the people of the Caribbean islands 'say very quickly everything that is said to them', Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, pp. 90 and 105; Larrington, 'Undruðusk þá, sem fyrir var', pp. 105–6.
[79] This whole section is an apt demonstration of Levinas' theories on the role language plays in recognition of a person and the removal of 'other' status from them. See for example Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 7–8; see also Kapuściński, *The Other*, pp. 65–9 and 73, and discussion in the introduction to this thesis.

This narrative about the importance of language and dialogue, in which conversation resolves disputes with diminishing success depending on the extent to which communication with the other party is difficult or even impossible, is not an obvious feature of Roman interactions with barbarians. However, the idea that language was a defining characteristic of a people can be found, as it features early in the ethnological descriptions of Caesar and Tacitus, and in Sallust's writings some minor points of the *Bellum Jugurthinum* depend on the significance of an interpreter.

Caesar seems to recognize language as an important descriptive and cultural feature, saying of the three peoples who inhabit Gaul that 'hi omnes lingua, institutis, legibus inter se differunt'.[80] Tacitus also notes language among the features of the *Britanni*, noting that their 'sermo haud multum diversus' from their neighbouring Gauls.[81] However, in Caesar deputations from various tribes make agreements with the Romans without any reference to language, and in general it plays little or no role in the interactions between peoples.[82] The implication must be that there were always enough interpreters around for this type of contact to not pose any problems. This is also the case in Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum*, where there are no apparent difficulties in communicating between Romans and Numidians, as when Adherbal addresses the Roman Senate, and when Roman envoys are sent to address Jugurtha in Numidia.[83]

However, the difficulties of communicating between speakers of different languages are not completely neglected by Sallust, and it is notable that where they are emphasized is in relation to the early settlers and the less civilized (according to Sallust) peoples of Africa. Firstly it prevents the Persian settlers of North Africa from building proper houses:

> Sed Persae intra Oceanum magis, eique alueos nauium inuersos pro tuguriis habuere, quia neque materia in agris neque ab Hispanis emendi aut mutandi copia erat: mare magnum et ignara lingua commercio prohibebant.[84]

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[80] 'Their language, institutions and laws differ between all of them', Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 1.1 (ed. O. Seel, p. 7).
[81] 'Speech is scarcely very different', Tacitus, *Germania* 11 (ed. Städele, p. 22).
[82] Cf. Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.18, 4.21–2, 5.20–1 (ed. O. Seel, pp. 111, 113–4 and 142).
[83] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 13–15, 22 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, pp. 50–8 and 66).
[84] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 18.4–8 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 62).

> But the Persians were closer to the Ocean, and they had the inverted hulls of their ships for huts, since there was no supply of wood in the land, nor could it be bought or traded from the Spanish: the vast sea and unknown language prohibited trade.

Then later, although the Romans had negotiated without difficulty with the Numidians, when it comes to negotiations with the Mauri, who are introduced as being ignorant of Rome in every respect except only knowing the name, the language barrier is recognized.[85] Secret negotiations between the Roman officer Sulla and King Bocchus of the Mauri require interpreters:

> Sed ubi plerumque noctis processit, Sulla a Boccho occulte adcersitur. Ab utroque tantummodo fidi interpretes adhibentur, praeterea Dabar internuntius, sanctus uir et ex sententia ambobus.[86]

> But when most of the night had passed, Sulla was secretly sent for by Bocchus. By both only faithful interpreters were brought, in addition to an intermediary, Dabar, a holy man and acceptable to both parties.

Interpreters are needed for these delicate negotiations, which involve the Mauri betraying their ally Jugurtha, and not just interpreters, but faithful ones at that, whose discretion as well as accuracy can be relied upon; if there was a misunderstanding or a secret was subsequently revealed the consequences could be disastrous for both parties. The power of an unreliable linguist to disrupt the status quo by misrepresenting a situation is demonstrated during a battle between Jugurtha and the Romans, when Jugurtha shouts out in Latin during battle:

> Tum Marius apud primos agebat, quod ibi Iugurtha cum plurumis erat. Dein Numida cognito Bocchi aduentu clam cum paucis ad pedites conuortit. Ibi

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[85] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 19.7 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 64).
[86] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 109.4 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 182).

> Latine — nam apud Numatiam loqui didicerat — exclamat nostros frustra pugnare, paulo ante Marium sua manu interfectum.[87]
>
> At that time Marius was with the front of the army, because there was Jugurtha with most of his force. Then the Numidian, learning of the arrival of Bocchus, secretly turned around with a few footsoldiers. Then in Latin — for he had learned to speak it while in Numantia — he shouted that our soldiers were fighting in vain, that just now Marius had been killed by his hand.

Although until now Sallust had assumed that communication between Numidian and Roman was straightforward, that evidently applied only to the members of diplomatic missions. For a soldier like Jugurtha (even though he was brought up as the nephew of a king) an explanation for his ability to speak Latin is necessary. He is supposed to have learned Latin while serving as an officer with a Roman army in Numantia as a young man, and now puts it to good use. Jugurtha's loud declaration, in Latin, that the Roman general Marius is dead strikes uncertainty into the Roman army and gives his own men an advantage for a short time, until it can be proven false by Marius' appearance in person on the battlefield. As in the sagas, language is power, and the knowledge of a second language is greater power; in some circumstances it is the difference between life and death, and not just for the speaker, but for all the people they represent.

If a general conclusion can be made about the role of language in the depiction of barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* then it is a double-edged one. When communication is not possible the Other is portrayed as more alien and primitive, but conversely, when communication is possible then the strange and threatening is transformed to the friendly and familiar. Interactions become those of equals, and constructive and mutually beneficial arrangements can be agreed upon. This suggests two things about the attitude of medieval Icelanders towards peoples they regarded as barbarians: first, that language was considered a defining feature of a person, and second, that this means a 'barbarian' individual is not immutably barbaric, but can achieve 'civilization' and equality regardless of background if they have the necessary linguistic abilities.

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[87] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 101.6 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 172).

Behaviour

Once a barbarian has been observed, and assuming that his or her appearance is not too Other for further contact, and if communication is possible through a common language and a mutual desire on both parts to communicate — only then is it possible to get to know the barbarian as a person. So what sort of character did medieval Icelanders think they would discover if they did successfully negotiate all this external clutter? The chapters on diet and material culture suggested that the ignorant reactions of some barbarians to everyday Icelandic objects like bulls and axes indicated a stereotype of stupidity, and the chapter on battles added to this cowardice and a lack of honour, together with a degree of base cunning. All of this is true on an individual level also, as the following case studies will illuminate.[88] However, high-status individuals from the same cultural backgrounds can behave quite differently and be positively portrayed, a special circumstance which will be discussed towards the end of the section. In a discussion of behaviour it is worth bearing in mind the *Historia Norwegie* version of the settlement of Iceland, in which two Norwegian murderers fled there to escape justice.[89] As was mentioned in the introduction, this view may have been fairly widely held outside Iceland, since the *Melabók* manuscript of *Landnámabók* states explicitly that the work was written to answer foreign men who say that 'vér séim komnir af þrælum eða illmennum'.[90] It is clear that in the *Historia Norwegie* narrative the Icelanders are the Other, murderous and uncivilized, and it is therefore logical that, as with diet and housing, Icelandic writers should react to this accusation by shifting it onto peoples even more remote to Norway than themselves.

Nagli the *skozkr maðr* from *Eyrbyggja saga*, described as a companion to a Hebridean traveller in one manuscript, but in two earlier manuscripts as *þjonustu madr þeira*, a status which suits his behaviour better, was discussed briefly in the previous chapter in the context of his cowardly flight, and earlier in this chapter as an example of a barbarian

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[88] Cole points out that 'Old Norse literature tends to depict personal qualities, particularly moral and intellectual ones, as innate rather than learned', a view which the following cases support, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 246 and 251.

[89] *Historia Norwegie*, ch. 8 (ed. Ekrem and Mortensen, pp. 68–71).

[90] 'We are descended from slaves and villains', *Íslendingabók; Landnámabók* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, footnote on p. 336); cf. *Landnámabók: Melabók AM 106. 112 Fol.* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 143).

physique due to his large size and fast speed.[91] The relevant passage here reads thus: 'Í þessu kómu þeir Þórarinn eptir, ok varð Nagli skjótastr; en er hann sá, at þeir ofruðu vápnunum, glúpnaði hann ok hljóp umfram ok í fjallit upp ok varð at gjalti'.[92] The important point for this discussion is the contrast between Nagli's arrival at the scene of the fight and his departure. He leads the group towards their enemies, showing off his confidence to his companions with a physical act of puffed-up bluster that is comically punctured when he actually comes face to face with the enemy. This makes him look ridiculous as well as cowardly, and his physical size adds to this impression. Usually when an Icelandic character is introduced with reference to his large stature it is an indication of martial prowess; as this scene develops the audience's expectation following Nagli's introduction as *mikill maðr* might well be for a heroic contribution to the battle, even with the slight foreshadowing suggested by the reference to his fast speed.[93] So it adds to the humour of the situation, and the pathetic absurdity of Nagli's behaviour, that all his physical advantage and bravado ends only in a panicked flight. The comedy value of this behaviour from an Icelandic point of view is demonstrated by the mocking verses that are subsequently composed at Nagli's expense by his Icelandic 'friends', which were quoted in the previous chapter.

Similar behaviour is exhibited by the more primitive of Sallust's barbarians, the Mauri and Gaetuli, when they stand firm for once in a battle, and spend the following night

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[91] 'Their man-servant', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Scott, pp. 44–4); Sverrir Jakobsson thinks that Nagli's behaviour may be primarily attributable to his 'Celtic origins', as he claims that Nagli is a 'merchant of good standing', 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', p. 153. How he deduced this status is unclear, as the manuscript evidence implies that Nagli was a servant of some kind, nor am I convinced that he has much grounds to claim, as he does, that Nagli was 'an Irishman'. As was discussed in the Introduction, the distinction between the peoples of Ireland and Scotland and the labelling of the latter with the Latin *Scotiae* and its cognates was well established in England as early as the tenth century, an identification which would have been spread throughout Europe by the writings of Geoffrey of Monmouth if it was not already universally accepted (cf. Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 328; Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots*, p. 3; Woolf, 'Reporting Scotland', pp. 226–9; *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 97; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *De gestis Britonum* 23, 156 (ed. M. D. Reeve, p. 31 and 211)). Some Latin texts available in Iceland may have continued to refer to the Irish as *Scoti*, as suggested by the *First Grammatical Treatise* (ed. Hreinn Benediktsson, p. 234) (cf. Males, 'Applied *Grammatica*', p. 265), but the overwhelming evidence of the *Íslendingasögur* is that a clear distinction was made between the two. Despite these technical inaccuracies Sverrir Jakobsson's basic point stands, that Nagli is characterized in a way which broadly fits his ethnic background as a *vestmaðr* and associates him with the idea of the *írskr* trait *gjalti*.

[92] 'At this moment Þórarinn and his men came after them, and Nagli was the fastest; but when he saw them brandishing their weapons, he was disheartened and ran away up onto the mountain, and became mad with terror', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 37).

[93] 'A large man', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 18, (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 33).

rowdily clebrating their supposed courage in a passage which is closely translated into *Rómverja saga*:

> Dein crebris ignibus factis plerumque noctis barbari more suo laetari, exultare, strepere vocibus; et ipsi duces feroces, quia non fugerant, pro victoribus agere.[94]
>
> Then making numerous fires, for most of the night they celebrated in the barbarian custom, jumped about and shouted; and the arrogant leaders themselves, because they had not fled, acted like victors.
>
> Ok giora ellda fyrer ser ferr sua framm mikinn luta nætrennar ok eru þæir glaðir ok kater ok giora brak mikið um sik. Ok sialfir hafðingiar giorðuz grimmir i orðum ok hrosuðu þui fyrer sinum mannum að þæir uoru sigr uegarar en hællduz við Romueria.[95]
>
> And they lit themselves fires and made a great show of thanks for nightfall, and they celebrated and were merry and made a great noise. And even the chieftains emboldened themselves with their words and boasted before their men that they had brought about victory rather than running from the Romans.

Delighted with having not run from battle, the barbarians become so pleased with themselves that they behave with ridiculous over-confidence, and become swaggering braggarts. As with Nagli, this boasting sets them up for a comic (or tragic) fall when they then come under attack, and, having spent the whole night celebrating, are woefully unprepared for the battle; their self-confidence immediately evaporates and is replaced by panic and fear. Descriptions of this kind of barbarian behaviour are also a feature of Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, including *Britanni* greedily abandoning pursuit to gather gold, and missing an opportunity of victory as a result, and *Scotti* fleeing battle at the first sight of a Danish army.[96] In addition to the combination of bravado and

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[94] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 98.6 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 168).
[95] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 30 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 138–9).
[96] Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum; Danmarkshistorien* II.iii.2–vii (ed. Friis-Jensen, pp. 150–6); cf. Saxo Grammaticus, *History of the Danes* I, 2.43–5 (ed. H. E. Davidson, pp. 47–9).

cowardice there is an element of short-sightedness in this type of behaviour that also features in other more personal portraits of barbarian characters.

This is certainly true of one character who is probably *skozkr*, though it is not explicitly stated that he is. This is Veglágr in *Fóstbræðr saga*, who might be supposed to be *skozkr* on three grounds. Firstly, that his name is not a given name but a nickname meaning 'wall-layer' derived from his vocation.[97] Secondly, that his status is that of servant, and servant and slave characters are often associated with *Írland* and *Skotland*; and thirdly it is to *Skotland* that Veglágr travels when he gets the chance. This Veglágr spends a winter staying with Icelanders in Reykjahólar, and while he is there people have many of their possessions stolen; naturally this arouses suspicions, and the householders decide to search through everyone's chests to see who is the thief. Veglágr is revealed as the culprit and only escapes death because his master Þorgeirr refuses to allow this, so that he is exiled from the district instead. Apart from the obvious dishonesty of the thief there is a naive short-sightedness that he could think his thefts would go unnoticed in such an intimate and crowded environment as an Icelandic house over the winter, or that he would be able to gather them from various hiding places, as well as the ones in his personal chest, and carry them away with him in the spring. This naivety, perhaps even stupidity, eventually leads to his death in *Skotland* when he continues his thievery there and is killed for it. Veglágr seems to be inherently dishonest, unable to learn from his mistakes, destined to be unpopular and ultimately to die as a result.[98]

Although Veglágr's proposed *skozkr* heritage is unproven, it is worth considering that the act of thievery itself is associated on two other occasions with servants from Britain and Ireland. At the end of *Hallfreðar saga*, Hallfreðr falls ill during a sea voyage to Iceland, dies, and is buried at sea in a wooden coffin with a number of treasures. The coffin washes ashore on 'Eyna helga' (Iona) where some servant boys find and plunder it, hiding Hallfreðr's corpse in a bog. However, like Veglágr they are caught (when Óláfr Tryggvason miraculously appears to their master in a dream), confess, and are let off once the body has been buried properly and the treasures donated to the church.[99] There is in the boys the same instinctive desire to steal and deceive that Veglágr has, and a

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[97] Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *Icelandic-English Dictionary*, p. 689.

[98] *Fóstbræðra saga*, ch. 13 (*Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, pp. 184–91).

[99] Similar desecrations of the holy and subsequent miraculous bringing to justice of the culprits feature in Norse miracle tales about Jews, another Other group more distinctive for their behaviour than appearance, Cole, 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', pp. 245–6 and 247–9.

similar naive and misplaced expectation that they will get away with their crimes. The abbot of course behaves correctly, whatever his provenance, so perhaps it is more their social status than their heritage that predisposes these servants to crime — or perhaps all three things go together, as they do also for the *írskr* slave Melkólfr in *Njáls saga* and for a band of *írskar* slaves in *Egils saga*.[100]

These slaves belong to Ketill *gufa* ('steam'), a settler in the Borgarfjörður region who had come from *Írland* with several *írskar* slaves. For no explicitly stated reason the slaves decide one night to run away and go raiding in the district:

> Þá hljópu þrælar hans á brott. Þeir kómu fram um nótt at Þórðar á Lambastǫðum ok báru þar eld at húsum ok brenndu þar inni Þórð ok hjón hans ǫll, en brutu upp búr hans ok báru út gripi ok vǫru; síðan ráku þeir heim hross ok klyfjuðu ok fóru síðan út til Álptaness. Þann morgin um sólarupprásarskeið kom Lambi heim, ok hafði hann sét eldinn um nóttina; þeir váru nǫkkurir menn saman. Hann reið þegar at leita þrælanna; ríða þar menn af bœjum til móts við hann; ok er þrælarnir sá eptirfǫr þá, stefndu þeir undan, en létu lausan ránsfeng sinn. Hljópu sumir á Mýrar út, en sumir út með sjó, til þess at fjǫrðr var fyrir þeim.[101]
>
> Then his slaves ran away. They arrived at night at Þórðr of Lambastaði's place and set fire to the house and burned therein Þórðr and all his household, and broke open his storehouse and carried out goods and valuables; then they drove home a loaded horse and then went out to Álftanes. That morning at sunrise Lambi came home, and he had seen the fire in the night; they were a few men together. He rode at once to find the slaves; men rode to meet him from the farm; and when the slaves saw the pursuit, they headed away, and abandoned their stolen goods. Some ran out to Mýrar, and some out along the coast, because the fjord was before them.

As with the acts of thievery by slaves and servants from *Skotland*, these terrible crimes by slaves from *Írland* are committed with no apparent plan beyond the immediate joy of

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[100] 'The Holy Isle', *Hallfreðar saga*, ch. 11 (*Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 199).
[101] *Egils saga*, ch. *77* (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 240–1).

plunder and violence. The burning of Þórðr in his house immediately characterizes the slaves as the most despicable and dishonourable of men, especially as they have no justifiable motive for doing so — although Icelandic characters do very occasionally resort to such methods it is always in the context of a bitter feud, as in *Njáls saga*.[102] If the motive is thievery, as seems to be the case, then like Veglágr they display a stunning lack of foresight in imagining that they could live long to enjoy their plunder. There is almost an innocence in the naive way the slaves then ride down to the coast, as if they expect a ship to magically appear and transport them away with all their ill-gotten gains, but at the end of the day it simply looks stupid, and they inevitably get their just reward. The story echoes the well-known episode from *Landnámabók* when Ingólfr Arnarson's stepbrother Hjǫrleifr and his men are murdered by Hjǫrleifr's *írskar* slaves, abduct their women, and flee to what becomes known as the Vestmannaeyjar, where Ingólfr tracks them down and kills them all.[103] This naive inability to foresee the consequences of one's actions and tendency to act impulsively is comparable to the description Tacitus gives of the early Germans when he writes that they are 'gens non astuta nec callida aperit adhuc secreta pectoris licentia ioci', though other classical depictions of barbarians tend to emphasize cunning as a trait rather than stupidity, as will be discussed shortly.[104]

Melkólfr is introduced as *írskr ok heldr óvinsæll*, but his actions during the saga emphasize his laziness and untrustworthiness more than his unpopularity.[105] He makes a show of obedience to his master's host in Iceland, a man called Otkell, who consequently asks to buy him, and Melkólfr's owner gives him away with a warning about his unreliability. As soon as Melkólfr has had his ownership transferred 'þá vann hann allt verr', and Otkell realizes that his slave is doing almost nothing at all. When Gunnarr Hámundarson visits, trying to buy hay and food, Otkell sells him the slave instead.[106] The following summer Gunnarr's wife Hallgerðr bullies Melkólfr into stealing butter and cheese from Otkell, and burning down Otkell's storage shed to hide the evidence, an action which he carries out, and which eventually results in a deadly feud between

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[102] Killings happen often between Icelandic characters, but a failure to declare the killing makes it 'murder' and is a key difference between an honourable and a dishonourable act, Hallberg, *Icelandic Saga*, p. 107.
[103] *Landnámabók*, chs. SH 6–8 (ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 41–5).
[104] 'A people neither clever nor cunning such that they reveal their deep secrets in the freedom of jocularity', Tacitus, *Germania* 22 (ed. Städele, pp. 104–6).
[105] '*Írskr* and rather unpopular', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 121).
[106] 'Then he worked all the worse', *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 121–2).

Gunnarr and Otkell. None of this is to Melkólfr's credit, but there are three features of the theft that are particularly worthy of comment.

> Þrællinn mælti: "Vándr hefi ek verit, en þó hefi ek aldri þjófr verit." "Heyr endemi!" segir hon, "þú gerir þik góðan, þar sem þú hefir verit bæði þjófr ok morðingi, ok skalt þú eigi þora annat en fara, ella skal ek láta drepa þik." Hann þóttisk vita, at hon myndi svá gera, ef hann fœri eigi; tók hann um nóttina tvá hesta ok lagði á lénur ok fór í Kirkjubœ. Hundrinn gó eigi at honum ok kenndi hann ok hljóp í móti honum ok lét vel við hann. Síðan fór hann til útibúrs ok lauk upp ok klyfjaði þaðan tvá hesta af mat, en brenndi búrit ok drap hundinn. Hann ferr upp með Rangá; þá slitnar skóþvengr hans, ok tekr hann knífinn ok gerir at; honum liggr eptir knífrinn ok beltit. Hann fer þar til, er hann kemr til Hlíðarenda; þá saknar hann knífsins ok þorir eigi aptr at fara; fœrir nú Hallgerði matinn. Hon lét vel yfir.[107]
>
> The slave spoke: "Bad I have been, but I have never been a thief." "Hear this!" she said, "you make yourself good, when you have been both a thief and a murderer, and you will not dare otherwise than to go, or I will have you killed." He thought he knew, that she would do so, if he did not go; at night he took two horses and put on them packsaddles and went to Kirkjubær. The dog did not bark at him and recognized him and ran towards him and behaved affectionately towards him. Then he went to the storehouse and opened it and loaded the two horses with food from it, and burned the storehouse and killed the dog. He journeyed up along the Rangá; then his shoelace wore out, and he took his knife and fixed it; he left behind his knife and belt. He journeyed on, until he came to Hlíðarendi; then he missed the knife and dared not go back; the food was handed over to Hallgerðr. She was pleased with it.

The first point of note is that though Melkólfr tries to refuse Hallgerðr's order, he does not have the backbone to stand up to her, but prefers the dishonourable path of least resistance. Hallgerðr's accusations about his previous crimes have no background in the story, so it is hard to tell if she has discovered a genuine criminal history from Melkólfr

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[107] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 48 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 123).

during his time in the household, or if she is just making up past crimes to threaten him by giving herself legitimate grounds to have him killed. It is not uncommon for Icelandic characters in the sagas to be pressured into criminal acts by women, but this is usually by appeals to the man's sense of his dented honour; in Melkólfr's case it is by appealing to his lack of honour and the fact that he has nothing to lose in that respect.

Then there is the betrayal of the guard dog at Kirkjubær, an act which seems treacherous, cruel and short-sighted as well. The dog thinks Melkólfr is his friend and so does not alert the household to his approach, but greets him affectionately instead. The reward the dog gets for this display of friendship is that, after Melkólfr has successfully raided the shed, he then kills the animal. Perhaps this is to prevent the dog barking as he leaves, but no reason is given in the saga, and having greeted Melkólfr in silence, presumably the dog would have stayed silent as he left. Rather than take this chance, however, Melkólfr takes the short-term precaution of ensuring he can escape undetected, without thinking of the bigger picture that when the dog is discovered dead or missing it will arouse the suspicions of his owners that the burning of the storage shed may not have been an accident after all.

Curiously this obvious clue is never picked up on, but this may be because a more obvious indication of guilt is discovered first. This is the discovery by the river of the slave's belt and knife, gifts he was given by Otkell and therefore easily identifiable, a discovery which is the result of actions which are careless, short-sighted and cowardly. Careless, of course, because Melkólfr accidentally left clear proofs of his involvement at a time when he should have been extra careful; cowardly because he didn't dare to go back and recover the objects; and short-sighted because he doesn't seem to realize that by not going back for them he is storing up a larger problem for the future and effectively allowing his guilt to be revealed. The similarities with Ketill's slaves as well as Veglágr, and the servant boys on Iona, are obvious, and the short-sightedness in particular also brings to mind the behaviour of Nagli, and of Sallust's barbarians in *Bellum Jugurthinum*. To summarize, having been introduced as unpopular, Melkólfr's actions add to this further negative characteristics including dishonesty, cowardice, stupidity and treachery.

These first three traits have been recurring features in the last few examples, but the last touches on a new theme of its own which requires elaboration. In the *Íslendingasögur* slaves in Iceland have little power to cause harm to Icelanders, as they

are rarely in positions of power, so that if they do betray their masters they always suffer the consequences, like the murderous *írskr* slave Gilli in *Draumr Þorsteins Síðu-Hallssonar*.[108] Interestingly, when foreign slaves actually take lives in Iceland it is *írskr* slaves, not *skozkr* slaves who do so, which echoes the experiences Icelanders have abroad in *Írland* and *Skotland* in the *Íslendingasögur*, with *Írland* generally presented as a more dangerous place for Icelandic individuals to visit. *Breta sögur* also suggests the dangerousness and treachery of the *Írar* in its version of the poisoning of King Eopa. In *De gestis Britonum* his poisoner is a Saxon, but in the Icelandic version the poisoner is *írskr*; as discussed in the previous chapter, this may reflect a bias towards the culturally closer *Saxar* in *Breta sögur*, with this barbaric behaviour instead attributed to a people more in line with Icelandic stereotypes.[109] *Írskr* characters in Iceland are also associated with magic use in some sagas, a portrayal which seems to contradict the *írskr* influence on early Christianity in Iceland demonstrated in the story of Unnr in *Laxdæla saga*, and to suggest their potentially dangerous and disruptive nature. In *Kjalnesinga saga*, the free *írskr* woman Esja, despite being a Christian, practices magic to protect her foster-son Bui against the wrath of the pagan establishment; an *írskr* incantation is also used to perform magic by an Icelandic magician in *Vatnsdæla saga*.[110] Magic use perhaps associates these *írskr* characters with more alien groups including the *Finnar* and *Skrælingar* who also use magic to cause harm to Norse characters; however, some Icelandic characters are magic users as well.[111]

When it comes to negotiating with noblemen abroad, who have whole countries and armies at their disposal, the stakes are much higher, and in these situations the stereotype suggests that trusting to the loyalty or promises of barbarian chieftains can be a grave error. An obvious example of this is the behaviour of the two *brezkr* jarls, Hringr and Aðils, who endanger the rule of Aðalsteinn *konungr* when they betray him and join

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[108] Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 246.

[109] *De gestis Britonum* 8.320–1 (*Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ed. Reeve, p. 177); *Breta sögur*, ch. 32 (*Hauksbók*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, p. 285).

[110] *Kjalnesinga saga*, chs. 2–5 (ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson, pp. 5–16); *Vatnsdæla saga*, ch. 47 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 127–8); Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 141–2; McDougall, 'Foreigners and Foreign Languages', pp. 184–5.

[111] Aalto, *Otherness in the King's sagas*, p. 125; it should be noted that Hebridean characters are sometimes also magic-users; perhaps their role, like the *Írar*, has an element of the Other within, being part of Icelandic society but recognisably different in background from the 'Norwegian' Icelanders; Sayers, 'Psychological Warfare in Vinland', p. 246; Ogilvie and Gísli Pálsson, 'Weather and Witchcraft', pp. 734–40; Mundal, 'Perception of the Saamis', p. 112.

forces with his enemy, Óláfr *konungr* of *Skotland*.[112] Hringr and Aðils had previously paid tribute to Aðalsteinn and fought in the vanguard of his army with his standard-bearers, so their treachery is personal as well as opportunistic. The opportunism of the betrayal is highlighted when the saga writes that the system had been set up by Aðalsteinn's grandfather, Elfráðr *inn ríki*, but that following the young Aðalsteinn's accession to the throne many of those who had accepted him as over-king became disloyal; two chapters earlier it adds on the same subject that 'váru þat bæði Bretar ok Skotar ok Írar'.[113] This behaviour is similar in some respects to that of two Spanish cavalrymen in Sallust's *De Catilinae coniuratione*, a version of which is included in *Rómverja saga*:

> Sed is Piso in prouincia ab equitibus Hispanis quos in exercitu ductabat, iter faciens occisus est. Sunt qui ita dicant imperia eius iniusta, superba, crudelia barbaros nequiuisse pati; alii autem equites illos, Cn. Pompei ueteres fidosque clientis, uoluntate eius Pisonem adgressos; numquam Hispanos praeterea tale facinus fecisse, sed imperia saeua multa antea perpessos.[114]
>
> But this Piso was killed while making a journey in the province by Spanish cavalrymen who were in the army he led. There are those who say the barbarians were unable to endure his unjust, arrogant and cruel command; others however say that those horsemen, old and faithful clients of Gnaeus Pompeius, assaulted Piso by his will; never before had the Spanish performed such an outrage, though they had fully endured many savage commands before.
>
> Þat var einn dag er hann for leidar sínnar. at íj spænskir riddarar veíttu honum at gǫngu. ok drapu hann. Enn hann hafði adr hertekít þa. ok gefit þeim grid. ok varo þeir nu i hans flockí.[115]

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[112] *Egils saga*, ch. 52 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 130–1).
[113] 'These were both *Bretar* and *Skotar* and *Írar*', *Egils saga*, chs. 50–1 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, pp. 128–30).
[114] Sallust, *De Catilinae coniuratione* 19.3–5 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 176).
[115] *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, ch. 34 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 176).

> One day it happened as he went on his way that two Spanish knights made an assault on him and killed him, though he had previously captured them and granted them a truce, and they were then in his army.

There is a substantial difference of portrayal between the Latin text, which explores the reasons why the Spanish cavalrymen might have been motivated to perform this act of murder and treachery, and *Rómverja saga*, which by contrast only emphasizes the gratitude the cavalrymen ought to have displayed towards Piso. No details are given about what might have motivated the Spanish soldiers to murder him, and more emphasis is laid on the mercy he had shown them in granting them a truce, making them look far more treacherous and unreliable than Sallust intended. It is an interesting example of a Roman model being adapted for an Icelandic audience, and particularly interesting in this context to note that the *barbaros* are portrayed more negatively, and especially as being more treacherous, in Icelandic. The *Rómverja saga* version is also closer to the portrayal of Aðils and Hringr than Sallust's original, for the emphasis on Hringr and Aðils is also on their previous service in Aðalsteinn's army and the treaty that had been agreed between them and Aðalsteinn's family, which they go on to break, like the Spanish soldiers in *Rómverja saga*, with no particular reason except the opportunity being there.

The *Skotar* are also portrayed as pact-breakers in both saga descriptions of Þorsteinn *rauði*'s short-lived kingdom in *Skotland*:

> Þorsteinn gerðisk herkonungr. Hann rézt til lags með Sigurði jarli inum ríka, syni Eysteins glumru. Þeir unnu Katanes ok Suðrland, Ross ok Meræfi ok meir en hálft Skotland. Gerðisk Þorsteinn þar konungr yfir, áðr Skotar sviku hann, ok fell hann þar í orrostu.[116]

> Þorsteinn made himself a warrior king. He joined together with Sigurðr *jarl inn ríki*, the son of Eysteinn *glumra*. They conquered Caithness and Sutherland, Ross and Moray, and more than half of *Skotland*. Þorsteinn made himself king over it, before the *Skotar* betrayed him, and he fell there in battle.

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[116] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 195–6).

> Hann lagðisk þegar í hernað ok herjaði víða um Skotland ok fekk jafnan sigr; síðan gerði hann sætt við Skota ok eignaðisk hálft Skotland ok varð konungr yfir. Hann átti Þuríði Eyvindardóttur, systur Helga hins magra. Skotar heldu eigi lengi sættina, því at þeir sviku hann í tryggð; svá segir Ari Þorgilsson inn fróði um líflát Þorsteins, at hann félli á Katanesi.[117]
>
> He set himself at once on a raid and harried all over *Skotland*, and won victory everywhere; later he made a pact with the *Skotar* and claimed for himself half of *Skotland* and became king over it. He married Þuríðr Eyvindardóttur, the sister of Helgi *magri*. The *Skotar* did not keep the pact long, before they betrayed him in the truce; Ari Þorgilsson *inn fróði* says about the death of Þorsteinn, that he fell at Caithness.

Although Þorsteinn is the aggressor, his conquest of *Skotland* is portrayed as rightful, and it is the *Skotar* who come across as disruptive. In both sagas they betray Þorsteinn, and he is killed by them as a result of this betrayal, which in *Laxdæla saga* is specifically said to be the breaking of a truce.[118] It is not clear from either saga if it is the *Skotar* under his rule who treacherously rebel, or if it is the 'free' *Skotar* in the other half of the land who renege on a previously agreed division of the country. *Eiríks saga* seems to imply the first and *Laxdæla saga* the second option, but in either case it is clear who the authors consider to be at fault for the final outcome. There is a sense that conquest is culturally acceptable if one has the means to accomplish it, and that it is a reasonable course of action for a Norseman to embark upon, but that to respond to that conquest, once it has been accomplished, with treachery, is not culturally acceptable, and yet is the action one might expect of the *Skotar*.

This *faux* outrage that a conquered people should refuse to accept their new ruler despite the conquest having been fairly won in battle, and even worse, that they should break a mutually agreed pact to do so, is also a feature of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*.

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[117] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 4 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 7).

[118] It is interesting to compare these stories with an account given in *Orkneyinga saga* of a staged battle between Þorsteinn's ally Sigurðr *jarl* and Melbrikta *tǫnn Skotajarl* ('tusk'), in which Sigurðr breaks an agreement and brings an extra man on every horse to the meeting. Sigurðr's reasoning is that he expects the *Skotar* to break faith, and he and his men accordingly slaughter the *Skotar* with no apparent sense of irony (or remorse). In a later chapter some *Skotar* who had submitted to Þorfinnr *jarl* do treacherously rise up against him again, *Orkneyinga saga*, chs. 5, 20 (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson, pp. 8–9 and 51).

Caesar describes British chiefs conspiring to betray him in a similar situation, and also relevant is an example discussed in the previous chapter where despite a previous agreement a Gallic tribe, the Morini, rise up when the opportunity presents itself and attack an isolated group of Romans in the hope of plunder.[119] In all these situations, as with Hringr and Aðils in *Egils saga* too, the barbarians demonstrate a willingness to make a show of surrender and loyalty; but it is only a pretence, and given the opportunity they will abandon a prior agreement, and with it their own honour. A further example of this from another context is in *Magnúss saga berfœtts* when Magnús goes ashore in *Írland* to gather provisions with the agreement of the *írskr* king, only to be attacked and slain with many of his men despite it being a feast day.[120] The lesson is clear and common to both Romans and Icelanders: barbarians cannot be trusted. In his speech against Catiline, the Roman orator and politician Cicero demonstrates the madness of a group of Roman conspirators who sought assistance from a Gallic tribe on the grounds that they 'tam dementer tantae res creditae et ignotis et barbaris'.[121] Sure enough, the Allobroges proved unreliable and immediately betrayed the conspirators, but it is the fact of the conspirators having trusted the Allobroges in the first place that Cicero uses to question their judgement; barbarians are so innately untrustworthy that one only has oneself to blame if one expects anything different.

The fickleness and untrustworthiness of barbarians is a recurring theme of Sallust's *Bellum Jugurthinum*, and therefore also of *Rómverja saga*. An extract quoted in the previous chapter described how Jugurtha played on the inexperience of the Roman commander Aulus to lure him into wooded terrain with a promise of a treaty before bribing the Roman sentries and attacking their camp at night.[122] As in Cicero's speech the folly and inexperience of the Roman is set against the unreliability and cunning of the barbarian, with disastrous results for the Romans. It is interesting that in these two classical examples, as with Þorsteinn in *Skotland* and Aðalsteinn in *Egils saga* the leader who is betrayed is a young and relatively inexperienced one. Distrusting the Other is not therefore depicted as an instinctive reaction, as modern Other theory would suggest, but as the result of the wisdom that comes with age and experience. In the Vínland sagas this

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[119] Caesar, *Bellum Gallicum* 4.30, 4.37 (ed. O. Seel, pp. 120 and 124).

[120] *Magnúss saga berfœtts*, chs. 24–5 (*Heimskringla III*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 234–7).

[121] 'So crazily entrusted such important business to unknown barbarians', Cicero, *In L. Catilinam Oratio Tertia* 22 (*M. Tullius Cicero*, ed. T. Maslowski, p. 68).

[122] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 38.1–4 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 88).

wisdom leads Karlsefni to take the precaution of refusing to trade weapons with the *Skrælingar*, and then in *Grænlendinga saga* to build a defensive palisade around his settlement, realizing that an apparently peaceful interaction could be replaced with a more violent one.[123] He may not be a conqueror on the same scale as Þorsteinn, but his prudence means he survives his expedition to a barbarian country, while Þorsteinn does not.

Quick and prudent action is the difference also between the failure of Aulus in the example from *Bellum Jugurthinum* referred to above, and the success of Marius when campaigning in Numidia. Marius is defending the town of Sicca from Jugurtha, 'quod oppidum primum omnium post malam pugnam ab rege defecerat', when the changeable nature of the townspeople requires urgent action:[124]

> Ac ni Marius signa inferre atque euadere oppido properauisset, profecto cuncti aut magna pars Siccensium fidem mutauissent: tanta mobilitate sese Numidae gerunt.[125]
>
> And if Marius had not hurriedly signalled to advance and to depart the town, surely all or the greater part of the Siccensians would have changed allegiance: so changeably do the Numidians comport themselves.

Having abandoned Jugurtha early on in the war, the people of Sicca opportunistically look to turn on the Romans in turn when this course of action seems favourable. *Rómverja saga* phrases the description of the character of the Numidians at this moment more forcefully: 'Þa mundu borgarmennirner aller eða þui nær hafa skipt trunni þuiat þæir eru brigðir i skapi'.[126] From examples like this it becomes apparent that the characterization of barbarians is significant not only for the barbarians themselves, but also for the way the primary culture behaves in relation to them, and especially the way they are able to adapt, or not, to deal with alien behaviour. On another occasion the

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[123] *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 11 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p. 228); *Grænlendinga saga*, ch. 6 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, pp. 262–3).
[124] 'This town defected first of all from the king after his lost battle', Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 56.3 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 112).
[125] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 56.5 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 112).
[126] 'Then all or most of the townspeople would have changed allegiance because they are fickle by nature', *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 13 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 73).

Numidians under Roman occupation are described as similarly untrustworthy and faithless, and as with Þorsteinn in Skotland and Caesar in Britain there is no recognition in any of these passages of the fact that the force against which the native people display these treacherous tendencies is an invading one:

> [Quia] genus hominum mobile infidum, ante neque beneficio neque metu coercitum.[127]
>
> [Because] that race of men was changeable in allegiance, before then restrained neither by kindness nor by fear.
>
> Þuiat þetta mannfolk uar u trygt ok suiklynt en ukunnikt uar það aðr Romuerium huart þæir uoru goðer eða illir.[128]
>
> Because these people were faithless and given to treachery, and it was unproved so far to the Romans whether they were good or evil.

In both the Latin and the Old Icelandic version the whole population of Numidia is characterized as inherently treacherous and unreliable, which presupposes that this is different, even opposite, to the natural traits of the Icelanders and Romans. In reference to the earlier individual examples of treachery and dishonourable behaviour it is also valuable as proof that the idea that whole peoples could have particular characteristics was known in Iceland at the time when they were writing their own stereotypes about barbarians into the *Íslendingasögur*.[129] A demonstration of this in practice can be found in the description of the *Írar* in *Eyrbyggja saga* by the Icelandic chieftain there as a 'fólk ótrútt ok illt viðreignar', and also in *Egils saga* when the author comments that 'Aðalsteinn konungr hafði skattgilt undir sik Skotland eptir fall Óláfs konungs, en þó var

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[127] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 91.7 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 158).
[128] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 26 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, p. 126).
[129] Richard Cole's work on Jews and *Blámenn* in Old Norse Literature illustrates this same point; cf. 'Kyn / Fólk / Þjóð / Ætt', p. 240; 'Racial Thinking', p. 21.

þat fólk jafnan ótrútt honum'.[130] In the Lucan section of *Rómverja saga* similar generalizations about the trustworthiness of barbarians in *Affrica* are made, echoing the sentiment of the Latin original: Libyans are 'suíkallt. ok vant at beriaz med suíkum' and 'illar treystir ek trunadi þeira i Affrica'.[131] That these general ideas about the behaviour of a people could be represented on an individual level is also demonstrated by Sallust when he describes the attempts by the Romans to get Jugurtha's 'best' friend Bolmicar to betray him:

> […] facile Numidae persuadet, quum ingenio infido tum metuenti ne, si pax cum Romanis fieret, ipse per condiciones ad supplicium traderetur.[132]
>
> […] he easily persuaded the Numidian [Bolmicar], being both faithless by nature and fearing that, if there should be a peace with the Romans, he would be handed over for punishment as a condition.
>
> Metellus fær aðuelliga snuið skaplyndi hans þuiat hann var a hlyðinn ok otrúr.[133]
>
> Metellus managed guilefully to change his [Bolmicar's] disposition because he was disobedient and treacherous.

Unlike the hapless Aulus who was humiliated by the wily Jugurtha in the lead-up to the battle in the woods, the experienced Metellus is able to take advantage of the treacherous nature of the Numidians to get the upper hand over Jugurtha himself. This theme brings to mind the popular maxim about being fooled twice; it is negative for a barbarian's portrayal that he should seek advantage dishonestly perhaps more than it is for the protagonist who suffers as a consequence, but the intelligent or experienced protagonist will quickly learn to see through and overcome this treacherous behaviour. This is

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[130] 'People false and difficult to deal with', *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 64 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, p 178); 'Aðalsteinn *konungr* had made *Skotland* a tributary kingdom of his following the fall of Óláfr *konungr*, though that people was consistently untrue to him', *Egils saga*, ch. 59 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 176).

[131] 'Deceitful and wont to fight with treachery'; 'I mistrust the faith of those in *Affrica*', *Rómverja saga*, AM 226, chs. 65 and 79 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 290–1 and 347).

[132] Sallust, *Bellum Jugurthinum* 61.5 (ed. Comber and Balmaceda, p. 118).

[133] *Rómverja saga*, AM 595, ch. 15 (ed. Þorbjörg Helgadóttir, pp. 79–80).

demonstrated, amongst other examples, by Gunnarr's treatment of the slave Melkólfr who got him into trouble by stealing cheese. Having given Melkólfr a fair chance and been let down by him, Gunnarr learns from his mistake and makes the correct decision to return Melkólfr to his previous owner. In this way the potential dangers associated with the bad characteristics of the barbarian are limited, because although they can cause harm in the short term, their malevolence can always be seen through and mitigated in the long term. Barbarians are not a threat to society, but are used in cautionary tales so that younger generations can both be affirmed in their sense of natural superiority, and also be warned of the potential dangers involved in interactions with the Other. It is also convenient from a broader perspective on these sources as narrative history to portray barbarians in this untrustworthy way, because it allows incidents like Þorsteinn's unfortunate end in *Skotland* to be attributed not to any lack of martial prowess or courage, but to the dishonourable lengths to which a barbarian opponent is willing to stoop. As with the descriptions of battles, it can be convenient from a literary and historical perspective to give an antagonist an advantage which makes the ultimate triumph of the protagonist all the more resounding, and if that advantage also confirms one's own sense of innate superiority, so much the better.

There is one notable type of 'barbarian' foreigner who is exempt from all these negative characteristics in almost every case in the *Íslendingasögur*, and that is royalty.[134] This subject was touched upon in the chapter on battles, where reasons for excluding *Brjáns-bardaga* from the discussion were given, but deserves a fuller treatment here. It is apparent from a number of the genealogies given in the *Íslendingasögur* as well as *Landnámabók* that some of the leading families of medieval Iceland traced their ancestry back to *írskr* royalty, which hardly seems compatible with the portrayal of active *írskr* characters in the sagas as treacherous and dishonest.[135] The answer to this apparent paradox is clearly one of social status — *írskr* slaves are bad and *írskr* kings are good. But does the fact of their being *írskr* have anything to do with their portrayal then? I would argue that it does, for in the *Íslendingasögur* some slaves are loyal, helpful and even wise, while some kings are malevolent and others occasionally foolish, but when it

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[134] The same observation has been made by Sverrir Jakobsson with regard to *Serkir* in Old Norse literature, 'Saracen Sensibilities', pp. 234–5.

[135] Examples from *Landnámabók* include chs. S 208 (H 175), 217, footnote to 348 (H 307), 366 (H 321) and 392 (H 348), see also Formáli §16 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, pp. 240–1, 248, 352, 367, 392–3 and CXXXI–II); a thorough summary of settlers in *Landnámabók* with links to Ireland can be found in Hermann Pálsson, *Keltar á Íslandi*, pp. 47–102.

comes to *írskr* characters the stereotypes seem more set, positively on the one hand and negatively on the other.

When it comes to ancestry there are positive references to *írskr* ancestry with regard to Óláfr Hǫskuldsson in *Laxdæla saga* and *Egils saga*, and with reference to Helgi *magri*, the leading settler of the Eyjafjörður area, in *Laxdæla saga, Eyrbyggja saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga*; both these men have mothers who are the daughters of *írskr* kings, Mýrkjartan and Kjarvalr respectively.[136] The regard with which Óláfr and his mother Melkorka are held by the Icelanders around them is vastly improved by the revelation that her father is Mýkjartan, and many of Óláfr's best qualities are ascribed to this ancestry during the course of the saga. On the other hand, not all sagas take every opportunity to reference royal *írskr* ancestry, so perhaps the picture is more ambiguous than a search for positive evidence alone reveals.[137] Whether these omissions are deliberate or not, where royal *írskr* ancestry is mentioned in the context of ancestry it is universally portrayed as a positive thing.[138] Royal ancestry can even outweigh the stigma of slavery, as it does for the slave Erpr, the son of Meldún *jarl* of *Skotland* in *Laxdæla saga*, who is referred to as a well-born man, and freed and given land on those grounds (though Unnr goes on to give land to other freed slaves, including another *skozkr* man).[139]

In encounters with royalty in *Írland* and *Skotland* they are portrayed in much the same way as royalty in Scandinavia and *England*. Travellers can seek hospitality with them, as Kari does for a winter with Melkólfr *jarl* (referred to as *konungr* earlier in the saga) in *Skotland* at the end of *Njáls saga*, and Þorgils with Hugi *jarl* in *Írland* in *Flóamanna saga*.[140] In *Laxdæla saga* Mýkjartan's arrival on the spot where his Icelandic grandson Óláfr has landed changes the dynamic from one of conflict to dialogue, and ends with

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[136] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 13ff. (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 27–8ff.); *Egils saga*, ch. 78 (ed. Sigurður Nordal, p. 242); *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, p. 4); *Grettis saga*, chs. 3–5 (ed. Guðni Jónsson, pp. 8–14); *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 1 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 3); *Njáls saga*, ch. 113 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 285–6).

[137] Cf. *Eiríks saga rauða*, ch. 1 (*Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarsson, p. 195); *Víga-Glúms saga*, chs. 1, 5, 27 (*Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, pp. 3, 15 and 91); *Svarfdæla saga*, ch. 14 (*Eyfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, p. 158); *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Ófeigs þáttr*, ch. 1 (6), ch. 5 (13) (ed. Björn Sigfússon, pp. 117 and 16); Helgi *magri* is decribed as 'nórœnn' ('Norwegian') in *Íslendingabók*, ch. 2 (*Íslendingabók; Landnámabók*, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, p. 6).

[138] Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Strangers in Icelandic Society', pp. 152–3; Norman, 'Treatment of Irish Ancestry', pp. 97–101.

[139] *Laxdæla saga*, ch. 6 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 10).

[140] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ch. 158 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 461); *Flóamanna saga*, ch. 26 (*Harðar saga*, ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, pp. 309–10).

him recognizing Óláfr as family, hosting him and his companions over the winter, and even offering to make Óláfr his heir to the throne of *Írland*. At other times *jarlar* and their relatives in *Skotland* wage war, and, as was described in the previous chapter, do so in a less honourable way than the Norsemen they are attacking; this could represent a difference in their portrayal from that of *írskr* kings or *jarlar*, who are never portrayed negatively in battle, perhaps relating to the fact that *írskr* ancestry seems to have been regarded as more common for medieval Icelanders than *skozkr* ancestry.[141]

The portrayal of Brjánn *konungr* in *Njáls saga* is in the starkest contrast to the *írskr* slaves discussed earlier in the chapter. He manifests in his person all the highest moral qualities of a Christian king, and is introduced as a king of better qualities than any other. There is a description of a pilgrimage to Rome he had been on, and his reconciliation there with a former enemy, whose son he then adopted (a clear parallel with Njál's adoption of Hǫskuldr Þrainsson), and his habit of pardoning men sentenced to outlawry three times before allowing the law to take its course shows his generous spirit. Brjánn's actions confirm this flattering introduction when he refuses to fight personally because it is Good Friday, and when he is attacked and slain despite this, his blood miraculously restores the severed hand of his son, removed by the same blow that ended Brjánn's life.[142] No other king of any country is portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* as positively as Brjánn is, so it is important to emphasize that whatever negative stereotypes the Icelanders had about ordinary *Írar*, these did not extend to their kings; indeed, quite the contrary. The same is true to some extent of *skozkr* kings, enough to conclude that they are also given a significantly different treatment by the authors of the sagas compared with ordinary *Skotar*.

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[141] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chs. 83–4, 86 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 201–5 and 206–8).
[142] Kennedy, '*Íslendingasǫgur* and Ireland', p. 500.

Conclusion

Studying the portrayal of barbarians in the *Íslendingasögur* is valuable for three main reasons. First there is an increase in knowledge about the worldview of the medieval Icelanders: which peoples they considered more barbarous than themselves, and by what standards they made this assessment. Second there is the way this reflects on medieval Icelandic society, or at least the literary circles within that society. The 'mirror effect' of Other theory suggests that the standards by which the Icelanders judged external societies are indicators of the very things which they consider most essential and characteristic of their own society. Third there are the striking similarities that the depiction of the barbarian in these texts shares with the wider literature of medieval Europe and ancient Rome.

The creators of the *Íslendingasögur* use a variety of different benchmarks when comparing foreign peoples disfavourably against their own culture and customs. Some are applied generally to all 'barbarians', whereas others show differences in the way the Icelanders conceived of different peoples. The *Skrælingar* are characterized by their unusual appearance and by a material culture and diet which combines the primitive and the absurd — and by a technological naivety which causes them to wonder at everyday Icelandic things like bulls, dairy products, and iron weapons. Similarly, the *Finnar* aspire to the material culture of their Scandinavian neighbours, especially dairy and metal, while their affinity to nature, in combination with their use of bows to fight with, makes them a dangerous enemy in their own land. The *Skotar* are portrayed, more than any other people, as being liable to take flight in the face of danger, whether at home in *Skotland* when being raided, or when visiting Iceland. Even those that are not specifically seen running from danger are characterized as being physically capable of running like animals. They are also characterized on several occasions as thieves.

The *Írar* are the least Other in their appearance and material culture, but their morality is arguably the most dubious. Depicted at times almost as an enemy within, they often give the appearance of being fully integrated into Icelandic society, but when given the opportunity they attempt to subvert that society and cause harm to the Icelanders around them. They do not stop at the petty thievery of the *Skotar*, but are much more socially disruptive, using fire and iron to murder Icelanders; even when Melkólfr in *Njáls saga* is ordered to steal, he carries out the theft with more violence and destruction than is

necessary. This violence is echoed in descriptions of journeys to *Írland*, where Icelanders invariably receive a hostile and aggressive welcome, sometimes resulting in imprisonment or death.

Other indicators of barbarity are shared by all three peoples, though often in slightly different ways. There are references to unusual or primitive housing in reference to the *Skrælingar*, *Skotar* and *Írar*. They all engage in battle only when they have a significant numerical advantage, and the *Skotar* and *Skrælingar* also use tactics of deception and surprise to gain other tactical advantages, though the *Írar* do not, which is in keeping with their portrayal as the most warlike of the barbarians; they are also the least likely to flee from danger. Finally, language is a shared feature of the portrayals that has different nuances in different situations. When it comes to *skozkr* and *írskr* slaves in a Norse-dominated context their inability to communicate is used to reinforce their social inferiority; in *Írland*, however, Icelanders who are unable to communicate with the *Írar* have their own freedom threatened, and the important role of interpreters is emphasized. In Vínland the language barrier is responsible for a break-out of hostilities that prevents long term settlement in both sagas.

Turning to the second point, the 'mirror effect' and the Icelanders themselves, the fact that these points are emphasized in descriptions of the Other shows how important these features of character and society were to the Icelanders themselves. Throughout this thesis I have introduced descriptions of the Other in the context of the Icelandic equivalent, and one can see that in every case the emphasis on 'barbarian' customs focuses on things which are important in all-Icelandic contexts as well. The focus on the primitive *Skræling* diet is introduced in the context of the eagerness of the Greenlanders, who are shown hanging on through a winter of starvation in Greenland, to take advantage of the grapes and good wheat-growing climate to attain a more civilized diet for themselves. The rare descriptions of barbarian clothing, which is unusually fashioned and associated with animal skins, are similar to descriptions of the clothing of *kolbitar* in Iceland, and should be read in the context of frequent descriptions throughout the *Íslendingasögur* of fine Icelandic clothing made from high quality cloth. The same applies to the weapons and housing of barbarians, fine examples of both of which are described at length in an Icelandic context in numerous sagas. Likewise, heroic Icelanders never run from battle, or fight with a numerical advantage, or lay ambushes for their enemies, and they certainly never steal; they murder (kill without publicly

declaring their involvement) only in the rarest of circumstances, like Gísli in *Gísla saga*, when keeping silent is the only way to keep the peace. These principles underlay the plots and main action of most of the feud cycles in the *Íslendingasögur* and can be regarded as intrinsic to the medieval Icelandic portrayal of their tenth- and eleventh-century ancestors. The appearance of Icelandic characters is also often invested with significance in the sagas, and, finally, the role of communication in resolving and avoiding conflict is another central one to the plots of many of the sagas.

The closer we look at the portrayal of the barbarian Other, the more apparent these defining features of Icelandicness become; this is the mirror in action. One can easily take for granted the Icelandic portrayal of their own culture, but when one sees that culture in the light of their portrayal of other cultures it is more obvious how important these elements of lifestyle and behaviour were to the medieval Icelanders. One can see that when certain characteristics are applied negatively to foreigners, the authors are not only portraying those foreigners, they are also making claims about what is important and what is normal to their own society.

With regards to the third point, the question of where these ideas originated is not one that can be perfectly answered, and there is certainly no single answer. Take the diet of the *Skrælingar* as an example; their portrayal as a hunter-gatherer society echoes Classical descriptions of the diets of the 'barbarians' living outside the Roman Empire, including in the works of Sallust which were available in Iceland at the time the *Íslendingasögur* were written. It also seems to respond to contemporary European assumptions about Icelandic diet, as described by Adam of Bremen, by shifting their uncivilized traits onto the *Skrælingar* and asserting in the same texts the Icelandic interest in grains and grapes. Thirdly, a hunter-gatherer society is probably a largely accurate historical portrayal of the Native Americans that the Icelanders came into contact with in the early eleventh century. We do not have to choose one explanation, although arguably, each alone is compelling. However, it is in combination that the explanations are strongest. A historical memory of *Skræling* diet, preserved in oral tradition, would have assumed greater significance for an author of written material when compared and combined with the Classical ideas about diet that entered Iceland in the twelfth century, and the need to emphasize the barbarity of the *Skræling* diet in comparison with the Icelandic norm would have been impressed on the Icelanders by the

knowledge that other Europeans were describing the Icelander's own lifestyle and diet as barbaric.

Similar reasoning can be applied to virtually every topic which has been discussed in this thesis: clothing, housing, weapons, conduct in battle, appearance, the language barrier and even morality. While it is possible that the view of the Other portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* is an independent Icelandic creation based on orally transmitted and historically grounded memories, there is little that is uniquely Icelandic about it. Given the similarities the *Íslendingasögur* share on this topic with the wider European and Classical literary traditions, both of which arrived in Iceland before the age of saga-writing began, it is more reasonable to assume that the authors of the sagas were familiar with foreign depictions of the Other and used them to inform their own writing. In this case we can see that it is no coincidence that Roman ideas of the barbarian Other are so similar to those of the saga writers, as these Roman ideas can be traced entering Iceland directly through *Rómverja saga* and indirectly through the medieval Latin literature of Britain, Scandinavia and northern Europe. Some of the creators of the *Íslendingasögur* at least must have had both means and motive to add legitimacy to their writing by framing it with this wider literary context. Icelandic literature is unique in many ways, but it is part of a wider European tradition which ultimately had its roots in Classical literature. The appearance of a recognizably Classical barbarian in the *Íslendingasögur* is proof of this.

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