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The *Grettis Saga* through Time and Space: An Exploration of Topics in Old Norse Sagas.

Abstract

The paper provides a brief summary of the Old Norse *Grettis Saga* and examines it in terms of research aspects outside of the field of literary studies. It highlights the historical, cultural, social, and religious contexts of the work, giving explanation as to where indications of them can be found in the saga. At the same time it tries to explain some of the more obscure aspects, such as the supernatural elements, in order to give clarity to the method of interpretation. Vital information on the grouping of Old Norse sagas, as well as the importance of ancestry in the texts, are provided and elaborated. Definitions of key terms essential to understand the source material are provided and kept on a level clear to a reader not fluent in the topic. Categorizations of the mentioned saga genre are also provided, with the hope to spark interest in the vast variety of motifs and key aspects of the Old Norse sagas. Further suggestions for research outside of the field are presented; however, they are not taken up completely. The paper shows the Old Norse sagas as potent, yet often overlooked, literary works worthy of attention as possible research material in the field of humanities.

Keywords: Old Norse saga, *Grettis Saga*, literature, medieval studies, sagas of the Icelanders

The aim of the following paper is to present the Old Norse *Grettis Saga* highlighting some of the many aspects in which the text can be useful in research, even outside of purely literary theses. Special focus will be put onto the historical context provided by the work. It will be presented how the topics mentioned in sagas could drive further research in other areas of the humanities.

First of all, it is crucial to understand the origin of the Old Norse saga. The word *saga* derives from the Old Icelandic verb *segja*, which means *to say* or *to speak* (Jungman 2011: 4). This tells us a lot about the essential nature of the text which is to be discussed in this article. Due to their strictly oral background and partial inaccessibility, the Old Norse sagas were not a frequent research topic. However, the rising attainability of translations and growing interest in the field of Medieval research focused strictly around the Old Norse texts have contributed to the popularization of such research all around the world. The fact that the sagas have, undoubtedly, undergone many—and probably very drastic—changes, does

not undermine their importance. Arguably, it only goes to show how important the accounts must have been to have survived only in oral form, waiting to be written down one day. This very importance is the driving force for the following paper; the amount of information to be extracted from the seemingly scarce accounts of stories is more tremendous as it may seem at first glance.

The saga that this article will be taking a close look at belongs to the Sagas of the Icelanders, or *Islendingasögur*. They are the biggest group within the different types of Icelandic Sagas and are estimated to have been written down around 1220–1400 A.D., but, as with most works coming from an oral background, the exact dating proves to be a difficult task, as the sagas' creation and their first appearances in the written form were centuries apart. Most *Islendingasögur* speak of personalities famous within the Icelandic society, for example members of important families (*Egils Saga*) or groups of regional locals (*Vatnsdoela Saga*). In his work on the Sagas of the Icelanders, Remigiusz Gogosz (Gogosz 2015: 16) proposes a distinction of the sagas according to their general topic:

- sagas of Scalds, discussing the Icelandic poets, such as *Egils saga*, *Hallfredar saga*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*
- sagas of outcasts, people legally banned from the island for murder; they combine various elements, like law, magic, adventure, and humor. For example *Gisla saga* and *Grettis saga*
- regional sagas, telling the tales of locals, f.x. mentioned *Vatnsdoela saga*
- strictly ancestral sagas about conflicts within given family members, like the *Eyrbyggja saga*

The author, however, stresses that his way of distinction is not agreed on by all scholars in the field, as it can be heavily affected by regional identity and the need of grouping the sagas with regards to the place where they take place. The *Islendingasögur* stand out from the other saga types for their retrospective composition and the frequent use of motifs, present also in the *Fornaldarsögur* (The Legendary Sagas), such as magic and the supernatural. The Sagas of the Icelanders offer a strong juxtaposition between the monstrous and the human, mixing pagan and Christian views, as well as showing ordinary problems of the island's inhabitants.

The *Grettis Saga* is estimated to have been written between 1300 and 1320 A.D., but the first existing written record of it dates back to 1500 A.D. (Gogosz 2015: 25). The main protagonist of the saga is, as the name suggests, Grettir Asmundarson, also called the Strong. Grettir was believed to be the strongest Icelander to have ever lived. *Grettis Saga*, or *Gretla* for short, is considered one of the most important works of the Icelandic prose, because of the late creation of the written manuscript (Magnusson [1869] 2004: vi). The saga's narrative is very intricate in the way that it starts by introducing the protagonists' ancestors. At first, the reader does not experience the story of Grettir, but rather is informed about his roots and given context as to his family background and bloodline. This appears to be a very popular motif in the Old Icelandic sagas, so much that nowadays many of them come published together with family trees. Providing the heroes background was most likely to be crucial for the development of a plausible, relatable narrative, at the same time stressing the strong hierarchical systems that governed society. In the case of *Islendingasögur*, the stories can be treated as biographical accounts of non-royal characters¹ and figures of chivalry, and are probably an attempt on the placement of heroic ideals in Icelandic literature. In the case of Icelanders it is tautological that ancestry was particularly important due to the lack of close family "at hand", since the inhabitants were settlers who had left their home countries in order to build

¹ The royal biographies are covered by another group of sagas, the so-called Sagas of the Kings.

a new life on the discovered land. It had to be through the family that a sort of recognized hierarchy could be formed (Clunies Ross 2010: 91). We can look for the remains of this tradition in the Icelandic surnames in use nowadays. As opposed to the general idea of inheritance of the surname, Icelanders use their father's name and the appropriate suffix—*son* or—*dottir*, as, respectively, the son or daughter of their ancestor.

The storyline of *Grettir* roughly starts off when the hero, due to his laziness and vehemence, tries to steal the meal-sack of a man called Skeggi, the house-carl of the chief whom the hero traveled with. *Grettir* “drove the axe into his [Skeggi's] head so that it stood in the brain, and the house-carle fell dead to earth” (Magnusson [1869] 2004: 38), which was later considered a crime, for which the protagonist is banished from Iceland for three years. This instance is extremely interesting when it comes to the judicial system of Medieval Iceland. The *Grettis Saga* is one of many to mention the circumstances under which a person gets outlawed and thus serves as a thorough and believable account of the laws existing at the time. It is crucial to consider that there was a 200–300 year time gap between the age of settlement and the time when the sagas were likely to have been written. Despite the generally complex political system of the country, Iceland as such did not have an executive power when it came to passing sentences (Clunies Ross 2010: 7–9). It seems that every instance was dealt with separately, and therefore sagas such as the *Gretla* can serve as excellent sources while researching executive laws of the period. When *Grettir* travels to Norway after being banished, he is able to make a name for himself through his heroic deeds, which included the presentation of his almost superhuman strength and fighting skills. He kills many men, thus gaining fame amongst the people of Norway. This, once again, leads us to some assumptions on what was considered to be right and wrong. The killing of an innocent person, who did not invade another person's property, steal from them or make false accusations, was deemed a crime, whereas killing in self-defence or the defence of one's honor seemed to be socially acceptable and, moreover, led to a good reputation. Clunies Ross notes that “personal honor was above all the currency in which the esteem of an individual was measured” (Clunies Ross 2010: 7) and due to the aforementioned strong ancestral connections, the re-claiming of honor in the name of a deceased family member was a frequent practice. In fact, we get an example of this in the last chapters of the *Grettis Saga*, where the heroes' brother seeks revenge for *Grettir*'s unjust assassination.

Another major motif in the story of *Grettir* that helps the reader understand the societal norms of the period is the encounter with the undead. Without any context, this part might be frowned upon when it comes to the research in society but, when read into, it does, in fact, offer a set of clear behavioral patterns to be avoided. Right after his return to Iceland the hero becomes a hireling, or sellsword for lack of a better word, and travels to a farm, which is said to be haunted. At this point it is important to understand a specific uncertainty as to the nature of the supernatural in the sagas. The Icelandic word *draugr* can be seen as a substitute for a revenant. The term itself might prove to be problematic during literal readings, as it is often not used directly. “It [the term] is actually never used about some of the most famous medieval Icelandic ghosts, which somewhat undermines the concept. [...] Instead we see words like *apthrongur* (revenant) and *reimleikar* (haunting)” (Jakobsson 2011: 284) but, in spite of this aspect, it is nowadays commonly used to describe the corporeal ghosts who appear in Old Norse literature. There is, however, no certainty as to the exact origins of the word. According to Kjell Tore Nilssen, the term *draugr* is of Indo-European origins—*draugh*—meaning ‘to betray, to hurt and even to die’; William Sayers

believes that the word comes from *dhreugh*—meaning ‘to harm, to deceive’, while Alan Crozier implies that the Indo-European term was *dhroughos*—meaning ‘companion’ (Visovan 2014: 124).

The *draugr* are depicted as walking corpses, who possess certain features, such as being “*hel-blár*” (“black as death” or “blue as death”) or *ná-folr* (“corpse-pale”)” (Kane: 2019). This in itself already imposes a very specific guise onto these obscure creatures, causes them to stand out and take on the role of The Other. In a small, hermetic community such as the one in Iceland, otherness was not received positively. The later parts of the saga stress this heavily, as I will mention in the following paragraph.

During this part of the saga, Grettir encounters a shepherd called Glamr. Despite the seemingly unimportant occupation of the man, this meeting leads up to a turning point in the story. Glamr is one of the most frequently mentioned examples when it comes to research on *draugr* and seems to serve as a paragon of monstrosity of the Icelandic undead, at the same time showing a very detailed, unwelcome social attitude. He is described in very little detail: “[...] a Swede, from Sylgsdale, who came out last summer, a big man and a strong, though he is not much to the mind of most folk” and “This man was great of growth, uncouth to look on; his eyes were grey and glaring, and his hair was wolf-grey” (Magnusson [1869] 2004: 96–97). In spite of this brief description, there are many things that stand out in the character of Glamr. First and foremost, he is not a local. Here we can see a good example of the aforementioned Other and his reception within society. Even though no attention is put to the man’s origin, it is later declared that he is still heathen. Those two details cause Glamr to seem alienated within the Christian Icelandic society he lived in. It is said straightforwardly that the shepherd does not get along well with the locals. Glamr is extremely hostile towards whomever he encounters, and seems to care only about himself. After his sudden death on Christmas Eve, the character was found “dead and blue as hell” (Magnusson [1869] 2004: 99), which creates another relatively strong sense of alienation. The blue hue of the body imposes nothing good, considering the features ascribed to the revenants. As a heathen, Glamr is denied a christian burial, deemed proper amongst the island’s inhabitants. As expected, this leads to the re-animated corpse of Glamr returning to the place of his death over and over, maintaining hostility against all people. The attitude of the now-*draugr* Glamr is the same as it was back when he was still human. According to William Sayers in *The Alien and the Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, “most medieval Icelandic ghosts are evil or marginal people” (Sayers 1996: 258). This statement very strongly applies to Glamr. Not only was he generally aggressive toward others for no apparent reason, but also denied to celebrate a holiday. Together with the already alien roots of the character, there emerges a very clear pattern of Glamr’s antisocial behavior and his lack of effort to adapt. Hence, the supernatural theme, serves as a clear warning toward any inhabitant of Iceland who would think about disobeying the enforced social and religious norms, as well as refusing to work together with others to keep up the existent hierarchy. The storyline of Glamr and Grettir is, in my opinion, a noteworthy starting point for further examination of the societal norms of medieval Iceland. Both characters neglect some of the unwritten rules, they are, however, not set at one level when it comes to the factor of being alien. After his death, Grettir is granted a christian funeral and does not return as a *draugr*. Despite the aforementioned lack of executive law enforcement, there seems to be a resolved distinction as to the notoriety of their behaviors.

Another notable feature of Glamr are his eyes. When Grettir, after a few unsuccessful tries, manages to put an end to the *draugr*’s existence completely, Glamr manages to take a look at the hero, thus cursing him for damnation and alienation later on in the story. Armann Jakobsson names this phenomenon ‘the evil eye’; he writes:

The motif of the monster's evil eye is implicit, another link between ghosts and witches. The meaning of the evil eye is obvious, although it appears rarely in sagas of Icelanders. This becomes memorable when Glamr manages to gaze at Grettir out of the corner of his eye, cursing him before being terminated. (Jakobsson 2011: 296)

In the story, Grettir is heavily impacted by this event, and seems to unwillingly recall it numerous times before his untimely and unjust death. This and similar instances can be read as early attempts of describing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is defined as the development of characteristic symptoms that temporally follow and are consequential from events such as, among others, exposure to actual or threatened death (Stanley 2019: 1880). The alluded symptoms include intruding flashbacks of the trauma. By no means am I an expert in the field, therefore I will refrain from dwelling deeper into the possible connections between Grettir's story and PTSD. My aim was only to point out another extremely interesting potential research topic, based on the Old Norse sagas, that reaches far beyond the lines of literary studies.

The storyline of Grettir and Glamr's encounter also forms a very strong foundation for the research on the paranormal and monstrous. Personally, I have explored this issue further in my Masters Thesis², analyzing the *draugr* through J.J. Cohen's monster theory (1996) and comparing it to the gothic visions of monstrosity. The results were very satisfying, showing how monsters, and the idea of monstrosity, have evolved through the ages, while still maintaining a very high level of similarity. In my thesis, I have only touched upon the possibility of Grettir and Glamr being the so-called doubles, their behaviors mirroring heavily, in an almost Jekyll-and-Hyde-like dynamic, which I have mentioned in the previous paragraph. I believe this motif holds a lot of undiscovered potential and deserves further exploration. Furthermore, it is a fresh and interesting example for students, of all artistic fields, interested in the horror genre, who would like to start their academic research and explore early examples of monsters and terror-inducing events. The aforementioned point could also prove to be highly useful in the creation of modern media, such as video games, where the knowledge of literary and cultural examples proves to be a strikingly important part of production.

Despite the recent increase in the number of studies based on sagas, such as the *Grettis Saga*, the genre is still highly underappreciated and hopefully will, in the future, serve as excellent material for scholars looking to explore the culture, laws, customs, the growth and cultivation of religion, the paranormal, and potential depictions of psychological pictures captured within the old manuscripts of the North. Researchers (such as myself) looking to find links between the vast variety of texts in Old Norse and more recent literature will find heaves of material as well, taking into consideration how certain motifs and experiences are connected more deeply than it would seem at first. In conclusion, this paper is a set of examples in which Old Norse texts can serve as an avenue for further research, and has shown them to be extremely potent sources for the study of humanities in many fields, which in the future will hopefully serve as an excellent example for the generations to come—showing that the old can be made new again, and that we always have so much more to discover.

² My thesis titled "The evolution of Monstrosity on the basis of the Old Norse Sagas and the Gothic Novel" has not been published, which I hope to change in the future.

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