

# **Homicide and Suicide in Viking Age Scandinavia –**

*a study of the society's perceptions and conceptions towards specific kinds of violent deaths as visible in written and archaeological sources*

Susanne Nagel



## **HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

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Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Supervisors: Jan Bill, Kulturhistorisk Museum Oslo

and Kristen Mills, Universitetet i Oslo

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## SUMMARY

Violence and violent death in the pre-Christian Scandinavian Viking Age are both particular research topics for various reasons. The cultural and social entanglements in the complex system of interpersonal violence in this society are both fascinating and complicated. This thesis will focus on two specific kinds of death: homicide and suicide. While homicide and murder has been a topic of scholarly research on the Viking Age, suicide has largely been ignored until recently. By looking at different sources from various academic fields as sociology, literature studies, archaeology and history, I will examine the way in which homicide and suicide as manners of death were perceived in the society, and which cultural understanding was underlying this view. I will analyse medieval sources such as the *Íslendingasögur*, ‘Icelandic family sagas’, and the *Konungasögur*, ‘the Norwegian King’s sagas’, the early Icelandic law-codes, archaeological finds and sociological research in the field of violent death. I will study the two manners of death through the lens of these sources, present different cases from each source-group and will draw conclusions based on the described handlings with the dead/death. Based on the results of these inquiries, I will draw some conclusions on how homicide and suicide were perceived in the Viking Age society.

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Violence has a wide range of meanings. For the purpose of this thesis, I will use a working definition of violence: the term will be used with the understanding of violence being physical violence against others, including fighting, murder and other physical abuses. Verbal violence will not be addressed here, even though it is a part of violence in general: “A violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind”.<sup>1</sup> Violence is understood as a personal interaction between different parties with the intention on physically harming the opponent.

The fact that homicides and suicides occurred, were committed and part of the daily life as well in the Viking Age is obvious and does not need further debate. The way people in this society perceived homicide and suicide, and which wider cultural understanding was underlying these impressions, the dealings with violent deaths and the question of punishment, is less clear and hard to trace.

What was the perception and conception of homicide and suicide in the Viking Age Scandinavia, and to what extent is that traceable in the written and archaeological sources?

I will argue that the people in the Viking Age society defined homicide after the deed was committed by the non-executing of specific actions. In contrast to the modern-day judicial situation where homicide is based on premeditation. Furthermore, I will conclude that suicide was seen as an alternative way out of unbearable life-situations, basically due to a less dogmatic belief-system and a higher value set on honour.

The concept of the Vikings was used in different historical epochs, rarely in an unbiased way. In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century nation building approaches it was, for example, used to unify the Norwegian people. The reminder of the glorious past of exceptional seafarers and explorers, probably encouraged some of the great Norwegian explorers from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Vikings and their image as fearless warriors was shamelessly exploited by the Nationalsozialisten in Germany in the 1930s and 40s. In later research the focus shifted to other sides of the pre-Christian Scandinavians: the society in general with all its cultural, religious, mythological, legal and trade-related aspects.<sup>2</sup> Here, the attempt will be to look at the more violent aspects of the culture, which were part of the society as well, of course, not denying the peaceful ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Johan Galtung (1990), “Cultural Violence”, 294, in: *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.27, No.3, 291-305.

<sup>2</sup> Research from scholars like Terry Gunnell (2013), “From One High One to Another: The Acceptance of Óðinn as Preparation for the Acceptance of God”; Christopher Abram (2006), “Hel in Old Norse Poetry”; Jenny Jochens (1999), “Late and Peaceful: Iceland’s Conversion through Arbitration in 1000”., etc.

The terms “violence”, “violent death” and “Viking Age” seems for most people to go hand in hand. There is a certain judgment that gets quickly rendered on the pre-Christian Scandinavians. But is that true? Were the so-called Vikings really more violent than other societies in the early Middle Ages? Or were they sentenced too early, only being “Kinder ihrer Zeit”,<sup>3</sup> practicing violence in order to survive and gain wealth just as many other people from many other places in medieval Europe?<sup>4</sup> This is a research question which would go beyond the scope and limits of this thesis: the focus here will be on the question of the conception of violent death especially homicides and suicides, how these were perceived in the society and how can we trace this perception in the written and archaeological sources.

The Icelandic written sources from the Middle Ages were looking on their own past with a certain paradigm, focussing on the violence in the life of their ancestors with exaggerated displays of violence. The brilliant *Íslendingasögur*, written years after the events they display, are of profound value when it comes to studying the Scandinavian pre-Christian times. The usage of this source, however, comes with many potentially traps: it has to be handled with great care in terms of reliability and always questioned. Still, they show in great detail the way in which the contemporary society of the time the sources portray worked. They tell about worldviews and worries, handling of emotions and loss.

To complete the picture on the Scandinavian early Middle Ages, archaeological remains are of essential value. Both sources, combined, enable us to see the world of the Vikings in a more detailed manner than would be possible by only looking at one of the sources. Admittedly, the nature of the written sources leaves a great many gaps in our knowledge of the period, and the temporal gap between the Viking Age and the composition of the sagas requires extra care. Combining all sources at hand increases the chances of interpreting the things in the most plausible way. By looking at victims of violence from the archaeological record it is possible to draw conclusions on the way violence was involved in the life of people from pre-Christian Scandinavia.

This thesis takes an interdisciplinary approach based on the archaeological, sociological, historical and anthropological research, besides the field of literature studies. The different fields with their individual approaches and focuses taken together allow the most realistic view onto this historical time and the specific topic.

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<sup>3</sup> German colloquial sentence meaning that in a particular era all societies had a similar behaviour, being all formed by political and social circumstances. I am not referring to the book by Knut Hamsun.

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Gareth Williams (2008), “Raiding and Warfare”, 196, in: Stefan Brink, Neil Price (2008), *The Viking World*.

It is hardly possible to identify violence correctly through looking at homicide and suicide rates, especially since there are no records of this region in that time. But by looking at the above-named sources in a critical manner it might be possible to get an idea on how the society experienced and handled violence and violent deaths, specifically the deadly violence against others and themselves.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND STAND DER FORSCHUNG

This thesis focusses on the Viking Age in Scandinavia (ca. 793-1066 AD).<sup>5</sup> The settlement of Iceland was undertaken mainly by Norwegians in the time between 870 and 930 AD. They established an early parliament, brought the laws from their home country and officially adopted Christianity in the year 999/1000. At the same time in Norway, first attempts of unifying the country under one king were made, the Christian faith spread and pressure on the Icelanders was increased. The time of production of the *Íslendingasögur* (the Icelandic family sagas) and the *Konungasögur* (Kings' sagas) is the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. The sagas, which will be used in this thesis, are lengthy narratives, mostly of famous families which are set for the most part in Iceland and in Norway in the time from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The sagas tell stories of events presumably happening 200-300 years before they were adhered in written form.

Researching on homicide in the Viking Age is difficult. To identify a juridical homicide in the archaeological record, more information is needed than usually available in the research context. A lot of the previous research focuses on killing in general. Davide Zori, Jesse Byock and a group of researchers excavated a settlement in Mosfell, Iceland where they identified houses, a church and a churchyard.<sup>7</sup> Growing interest and technological improvement enabled deepening research on skeletal remains, which is among others conducted by Per Holck, who re-examined the Oseberg- and the Gokstad-ship graves.<sup>8</sup>

Research on suicide in history, especially focused on the northern hemisphere and Scandinavia in pre-Christian times, is scant. That goes as well for the more general research on

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<sup>5</sup> I will be using the term 'Viking Age' when referring to an event occurring during the time between broadly 800 and 1100 and when the event took place in Scandinavia and in pre-Christian circumstances. The term 'Middle Ages' will also be used, but with the time 500-1500 AD in mind and a Christian environment. Furthermore, I use the term 'Scandinavia' inclusively to refer to Iceland and as well as mainland Scandinavia.

<sup>6</sup> There are other genres of sagas not set in the time or area. My focus is however on the two types of sagas mentioned.

<sup>7</sup> Davide Zori et al. (2014), *Viking Archaeology in Iceland. Mosfell Archaeological Project*.

<sup>8</sup> Per Holck (2009), "The Skeleton from the Gokstad ship: New Evaluation of an Old Find", *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 40-49.

suicide in past societies. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim published his profound study *Le Suicide* in 1897.<sup>9</sup> His book combined sociological research, statistical, psychological, philosophical and historical research. It is described by Alexander Murray<sup>10</sup> as highly significant for the research on the topic. Durkheim researches suicide in a very precise, organized and systematic way and includes statistical methods in his research. This made his work one of the first using the material in this way.<sup>11</sup> Kirsi Kanerva is currently researching suicides in medieval Scandinavia, posthumous restlessness and many related topics.<sup>12</sup> An interesting project which exists both in digital and analog form is the “Ethics of Suicide Archive”.<sup>13</sup> It is a partnership between Oxford University Press and the University of Utah J. Willard Marriott Library. It involves many researchers with different focuses from all over the world and covers a timespan from ancient Egypt to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Old Norse written sources. A broader look at the topic gives Alexander Murray in his tripartite work *Suicide in the Middle Ages*.<sup>14</sup>

Based on the work of the previously mentioned scholars and others, I am building up my argument and hypotheses to explore the topic of homicide and suicide in the mentioned timespan. Furthermore, my research on violent deaths in different academic disciplines will help getting a better insight into this topic and hopefully create a basis from which further research can be done. It will be necessary in places to point out how the narratives set in the Viking Age’s conceptualization of homicide and suicide differed from a modern Western perspective. The main focus here is to arrive at a better understanding of how the Viking Age perceptions differ from the modern perspective and show the way homicide and suicide were seen in this particular historical time.

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<sup>9</sup> Émile Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, preface xi.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Murray (1998), *Suicide in the Middle Ages, Vol.1: The Violent against Themselves*, 10, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, x. Aside from Durkheim other scholars, like Enrico Morselli began to focus on suicide as a part of human history and actions in 1879, see Murray (1998), Vol 1, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Kanerva researches the topic in her online blog “Suicide in Medieval Scandinavia”:

<https://historyofmedievalsuicide.wordpress.com/>. See as well from her: Kanerva, Kirsi (2013), “Rituals for the Restless Dead: The Authority of the Deceased in Medieval Iceland. Influence, Legitimacy, and Power in Medieval Society”, 205-227, in: Sini Kangas, Mia Korpiola, Tuija Ainonen (ed.) *Authorities in the Middle Ages. Influence, Legitimacy and Power in Medieval Society*; Kanerva, Kirsi (2014), “Disturbance of the Mind and Body: Effects of the Living Dead in Medieval Iceland” 219-241, in: Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, Susanna Niiranen (ed.) *Mental (Dis) Order in Later Medieval Europe*, Leiden, Netherlands: Brill; Kanerva, Kirsi (2015), “Porous Bodies, Porous Minds. Emotions and the Supernatural in the *Íslendingasögur* (ca. 1200-1400).” in: *Annales Universitatis Turkuensis* 2015, PhD-thesis at the University of Turku.

<sup>13</sup> <http://ethicsofsuicide.lib.utah.edu/>.

<sup>14</sup> Volume 1 from 1998 titled “*The Violence against Themselves*”, Volume 2 from 2000 titled “*The Curse of Self-Murder*”, and Volume 3 is still to be expected. He focuses on France, England, Italy and Germany and presents in his very detailed research different sources, as chronicles, legal and religious sources about suicide and motives (Volume 1) in the time roughly between 1000 and 1500. In Volume 2 he focuses on attitudes towards and thoughts on suicide among the living.

## METHOD

In addition to the above-mentioned sources I will consult sociological and anthropological research, as well as criminal laws from 21<sup>st</sup> century Norway. The sociological sources will be primarily used in the chapter on suicide, in order to categorise the different types and to help understanding the different cases that I will analyse. The modern-day criminal laws will be used to show the current understanding and definition of a homicide in most modern European countries. This will help to see differences in the conception between today and the Viking Age.

The argument of this work will be tested by examining different cases of suspected homicide and suicide in the written and archaeological sources. To support and supplement the cases, sociological research definitions will be consulted. The cases shall provide examples and insight into the circumstances, reasons and handlings of homicides and suicides by the society. Furthermore, when appropriate a comparison with modern-day conceptions will be undertaken. The different sources used will allow a better understanding.

The weakness of the written sources is the question of reliability. Some sagas contain actual historical events and people, other parts are however entirely fictional. Even though they seem to depict actual historical events, they should not be understood as historical accounts. Determining which parts are actually reliable is therefore extremely difficult and make sagas tricky to analyse. Aside from that, the historical setting of the sagas is older than the manuscripts we have of them. Meaning that while they are set in the time between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the writing down occurred two to three centuries later. Furthermore, they were written in a Christian environment and by that were exposed to bias and changes with regards to content. A strength of these sources is the unique possibility to gain information on personal emotions, ideas and background information on deeds and the society in general.

The archaeological sources, as well, have the weakness that they are notoriously difficult to interpret. That can make finds very subjective and prone to exploitation and misinterpretation. The strength of these sources is in the objective information material finds can provide when looking at the source itself and its environment. Furthermore, the physical presence itself can already prove a lot.

## VIOLENCE IN THE SOCIETY AND THE CONCEPTION OF THE AFTERLIFE

To understand the pre-Christian society and its attitude to and handling of violent deaths, it is necessary to take a look at the amount of violence, its significance and cultural meaning.

The societies in Iceland and Norway in the time from ca. 870 (settlement of Iceland begins<sup>15</sup>) until the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, are broadly similar, but have important differences. One shared feature was that both were rural societies with no or only very little urbanisation.<sup>16</sup> Iceland, being previously uninhabited, was settled mainly from Norway in the years between 870 and 930 AD.<sup>17</sup> After this period all fertile areas on the island were taken. The society that developed consisted of loose farmsteads inhabiting families and the associated staff (farm helpers, slaves, guests and relatives) forming a household together. The households lived on farming cattle and sheep, partially growing crops and fishing. In most cases an adult male was the head of the household, defining him as a free man and *bóndi* (farmer).<sup>18</sup> All free men theoretically were of equal political status. They gathered once a year for two weeks to form the Alþing, the main governing assembly, and support their *goði*. *Goðar* were men who, based on support of other *bóndi*, gained political power and influence. Practically, there did exist a clear hierarchical differentiation between the groups. Striving for individual autonomy and constantly taking chances to gain more personal power seem to have been an ideal.<sup>19</sup>

The greatest difference between Iceland and Norway was the political system. Whereas in Iceland on the annual assembly all free men gathered together to discuss juridical and political matters, the geographical peculiarities of the Norwegian countryside complicated such assemblies and split the country into different main regions.<sup>20</sup> The livelihood in Norway was similar to that in Iceland. Comparable to the relationship between *bóndi* and *goði*, in Norway so-called strongmen or local kings emerged.<sup>21</sup> The society was more than the Icelandic one divided into the group of farmers and the one of kings, each living more or less parallel in their own spheres. The kings, being more influenced than Iceland from Europe, striving for more power. In both countries a big and influential group of people was trying to gain more power, wealth and influence among their people and later as well over others. This led to conflicts, feuds and civil wars.

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<sup>15</sup> Siân Grønlie, (transl.) (2006), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga*, xvii.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Kaupang in Norway being a trade centre from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century on. See: Ole Jørgen Benedictow (2003), "Demographic conditions", 237, in: Knut Helle (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia Vol.1, Prehistory to 1520*. 237-249.

<sup>17</sup> Grønlie (2006), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga*, xvii

<sup>18</sup> Oren Falk (2002), "The Cultural Construction of Violence in Medieval Western Scandinavia", 7. Doctoral thesis University of Toronto.

<sup>19</sup> Falk (2002), "The Cultural Construction", 8.

<sup>20</sup> Falk (2002), "The Cultural Construction", 13.

<sup>21</sup> Falk (2002), "The Cultural Construction", 13.

In Iceland, the violence in the society can be seen in the sagas, illustrated by duels, feuds, war and revenge killing.<sup>22</sup> Examples show that the artistic focus of some authors is particularly on the actions of violence, especially those feuds were described in which whole households were involved, including the servants. These feuds were often undertaken by more wealthy households due to the high input of lives and repaying of losses. They mostly seem to be based on vengeance and can stretch over many years. One example from *Njáls saga* describes the feud rising from a dispute between Bergþóra and Hallgerð bouncing back and forth between the families symmetrically causing damage on both sides.<sup>23</sup> The accounts of these feuds and revenge killings in the written sources and the appearance of laws on this field indicate a presence of violence in the society. The actual severity of violence cannot be determined precisely. It does however seem to have been a part of everyday life, at least as the sagas depict daily life.

One further aspect that should be included when writing about the pre-Christian Scandinavian society is of course the religion. The different regions with their individual living environments, rituals and habits probably were as well different in the religious customs and beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that the term “religion” in the context to the pre-Christian Scandinavians is difficult or even inappropriate: there was no such thing as one coherent religion. It is more fitting to speak in this context of “belief-systems”.<sup>24</sup> The pre-Christian belief-system was probably more flexible regarding rules and structures and contained a whole pantheon. Even though it was important in the people’s daily life, it defined only one aspect in their identity.

It is important to keep in mind, that all the above used sources were written down in a Christian environment. The author’s outlook is shaped in a Christian framework and did not share the same religion and worldviews as their ancestors from the Viking Age. As well when discussing the Viking Age belief system, the cautious interpretation of the sources is essential. Snorri wrote his versions of the Old Norse sagas several centuries after the conversion. The conversion in Iceland was around 1000, Snorri’s active phase, however, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> until the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. His work is therefore as well influenced by the Christian faith and should be used with caution.

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<sup>22</sup> William Ian Miller (1990), *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 180. Further: Jesse L. Byock (1982), *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, Berkeley: University of California Press.; Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (1993), *Fortælling og ære: studier i islendingesagaerne*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

<sup>23</sup> Miller (1990), *Bloodtaking*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Andreas Nordberg: “Continuity, Change and Regional Variation in Old Norse Religion”, 119-151, in: Catharina Raudvere, Jens Peter Schjødt (ed.), *More than Mythology*, 121.

The concept of the life after death in which the people strongly believed in was different from the Christian idea of heaven and hell. In general, the people in pre-Christian Scandinavia believed in a life in different, individual afterlife-realms. One aspect of the belief was that death was followed by a journey to somewhere.<sup>25</sup> The belief in life after death can furthermore be divided in two concepts: basically, into one realm in which the deceased goes and lives on (for example Valhøll), and another where the deceased is living inside his or her grave and by that stays on earth.<sup>26</sup>

It was not important how well a life was lived, but rather how a person died. The kind of death decided over the afterlife-realm: Valhøll, Fólkvangr, Rán or Hel. The ideal for men was to die in a battle or fight, only in these circumstances was the afterlife in Valhøll granted to them where they would dine and fight on Óðinn's side.<sup>27</sup> Half of the dead warriors would go to Óðinn, the other half was destined to join Freyja in her abode Fólkvangr.<sup>28</sup> The prospect of a life after death decreases the fear of it. Dying violently, as can be traced in the sources, at least for the elite, seems to have been attractive. Furthermore, in the context of suicide, the absence of the Christian concept of sin allowed the pre-Christian Scandinavians to take matters into their own hands when desired or necessary. One aspect which should be mentioned as well at this place is the mentioned fear of dying in bed. This was regarded a "bad death"<sup>29</sup> and especially men feared to die like this, which would mean the exclusion from the warrior "paradise" Valhøll.

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<sup>25</sup> Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson (1968), *The Road to Hel. A study of the Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> Davidson (1968), *Road to Hel*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> See: Anthony Faulkes (ed.) (1982), *Snorri Sturluson: Edda*, 21: "Óðinn heitir Alföðr, þvíat hann er faðir allra goða. Hann heitir ok Vallföðr, þvíat hans óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla, þeim skipar hann Valhøll ok Vingólf, ok heita þeir þá einherjar. "(Óðinn is called All-father, for he is father of all the gods. He is also called Valföðr (father of the slain), since all those who fall in battle are his adoptive sons. He assigns them places in Valhøll and Vingólf, and they are then known as Einherjar. See: Anthony Faulkes (2012), *Snorri Sturluson. The Uppsala Edda*, 171.)

<sup>28</sup> See: Faulkes (1982), *Edda*, 24: "En Freyja er ágætust af Ásynjum. Hon á þann bæ á himni er Fólkvangar heita, ok hvar sem hon ríðr til vígs, þá á hon hálfan val, en hálfan Óðinn..." (His other child is Freyja. She is the most glorious of the Ásynjur. She has a dwelling in the heavens that is called Fólkvangr, and wherever she rides to battle she gets half of all the slain, and Óðinn gets the other half. See: Faulkes (2012), *The Uppsala Edda*, 178.) or: Jónas Kristjánsson, Vésteinn Ólason (2014) (ed.), *Eddukvæði 1, Goðakvæði: Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, 370: Grímnismál ch.14: „Fólkvangr er inn níundi, en þar Freyja ræðr sessa kostum í sal; hálfan val hon kýss hverjan dag, en hálfan Óðinn á. "(The ninth is Fólkvangr, where Freyja decrees, who shall have seats in the hall; The half of the dead each day does she choose, and half does Othin have. See: Henry Adams Bellow (1923), *The poetic Edda*, 91.)

Judy Quinn writes about the sexual aspect of the goddesses (Hel and Rán) and their realms. Death is being personified, as a female claiming the dead for her personal pleasure shows parallels to the Valkyries and Freya. Judy Quinn (2014), "Mythologizing the Sea: The Nordic Sea-Deity Rán", 71-100, in: Tangherlini, Timothy R. (ed.), *Nordic Mythologies: Interpretations, Intersections, and Institutions*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: North Pinehurst Press

<sup>29</sup> There does not seem to be a clear definition of this term. A „bad death“ is probably anything unusual or unwanted and could include anything from dying of a disease in bed til being victim of a murder.

Another realm of the Old Norse mythology is the underworld, or Hel. Snorri Sturluson describes in *Gylfaginning* Hel as being both, the realm of a certain group of dead, and as well as the goddess of this realm. Christopher Abram<sup>30</sup> points out that Snorri might have interwoven two different perceptions of the pre-Christian world for his mythological work. According to Abram, in skaldic verses Hel is mentioned in kennings which indicate that Hel was perceived as a female mythological figure who actively collects the dead.<sup>31</sup> The authors of the poetic Edda however, stated by Abram, saw Hel as a realm for the dead, and not a personification.<sup>32</sup> It seems to be the kingdom of the dead and the place where those who died of sickness and old age belong to.<sup>33</sup> Both, the deity as well as the realm have the synonymous function of representing ‘dying’ or ‘dead’.

A third realm of the dead is Rán. Together with Ægir she is a personification of the sea.<sup>34</sup> Into this realm belonged those who drowned at sea.<sup>35</sup> Her name means “robbery” and Judy Quinn points out that this has to be understood as her being the robber of life from men.<sup>36</sup> There are different conceptions regarding her presence in the mythology of the Old Norse. It seems like she personifies death by drowning, expresses the force of the sea and as well can be understood as a seducer of men.<sup>37</sup>

According to the pre-Christian belief conceptions and the sources the coherent thought emerges that death was not the end of existence. This is what the different realms and ideas show, regardless whether they were thought to be for men, women, drowned people or warriors. Despite regional or gender-related differences, the thought of an afterlife existed across Scandinavia and, in a way, united the people regardless their specific belief system. One thing seems sure, there were all kinds of different conceptions of death and the afterlife and not one strict compulsory concept. This indicates as well quite different dealings with death.

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Abram (2003), “Representations of the pagan afterlife in medieval Scandinavian literature”, Doctoral thesis Cambridge University.

<sup>31</sup> Abram (2003), “Representations of pagan afterlife”, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Abram (2003), “Representations of pagan afterlife”, 49.

<sup>33</sup> Davidson (1968), *Road to Hel*, 84.

<sup>34</sup> Quinn (2014), “Mythologizing the Sea”, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Ström; Biezais (1975) *Germanische und Baltische Religion*, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Quinn (2014), “Mythologizing the Sea”, 74.

<sup>37</sup> Quinn (2014), “Mythologizing the Sea”, 86. She furthermore points out, that by personifying the death and describing her (the death – Rán) motives as sexual would turn a defeat in battle into a seduction from a divine force which makes a better ending in the eye of an Old Norse poet.

## DEFINITIONS OF VIOLENT DEATHS

In general, manners of death can be divided into two categories: natural death and unnatural death: the definition of 'natural death' is, due to a high degree of subjectivity and the complexity of the theme, complicated to determine. It may be the case that 'the definition' isn't definable, as not a single definition will fit all cultural contexts.

In a biological sense, it could be defined as something that every living being has to face at the end of their lives, or similarly, a destiny that is part of this natural system.<sup>38</sup> A useful working definition in this context is that natural death is "a normal, not exceptional"<sup>39</sup> death: "death is natural if it conforms to age or disease and is not accidental or violent."<sup>40</sup> However, there is as well a cultural component to categorizing death as natural or unnatural. The biological and cultural aspects of natural deaths interact individually in different cultures. There are for example, different definitions of the term in general: from 'natural death' as a biological demise; over a death which is inherent and not prolonged; a peaceful death, for example while sleeping; up to a fate which is universal to all living beings.<sup>41</sup>

The counterpart of 'natural death' is 'unnatural death'. This manner of death can be subdivided into further categories: accident, suicide and homicide.<sup>42</sup> It might be useful to include the subcategory 'death in combat', and furthermore, regarding the pre-Christian Scandinavian society 'ritual death', leaving five different manners of death. In the course of this thesis, I will work with the term 'violent death' when referring to an unnatural death. In general, violent death can be defined as a death resulting from a violent trauma which either was inflicted to the individual or happened accidentally.

Death by accident can best be defined as an unforeseeable and unexpected violent death that was not intended by the victim or a second party. Examples could include falling off a horse, being attacked by a wild animal or drowning: basically, anything that could cause a fatal trauma to an individual.

Furthermore, it is necessary to mention death in battle or war. There were engagements in battle in this time and it can be assumed that many men in a certain age and social group died

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<sup>38</sup> Dallas M. High (1978), "Is 'Natural Death' an Illusion?", 41, in: *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol.8, No.4, 37-42, 1978.

<sup>39</sup> High (1978), "Natural Death", 41.

<sup>40</sup> High (1978), "Natural Death", 41.

<sup>41</sup> High (1978), "Natural Death", 41.

<sup>42</sup> Jesse Byock (et al.) (2012), "The Axed Man of Mosfell: Skeletal Evidence of a Viking Age Homicide and the Icelandic Sagas", 6, in: Ann L.W. Stodder, Ann M. Palkovich: *The Bioarchaeology of Individuals*, University Press of Florida.

in battle or war. This death is as well violent and cannot be covered by the mentioned categories. Killing someone in the circumstances of combat may be intentional, but not necessarily a homicide, since it is not premeditated in the same sense as a homicide would be. It is rather a reaction than a planning ahead. Of course, battle situations could be used to hide and cover up homicidal intentions, as well as suicidal ones. Death in battle can potentially also be categorized as an accidental death: killing the wrong person in battle, an axe swirling around hitting someone without the intention of the axe's owner.

'Ritual death' or 'sacrificial death' can be defined as a sacrifice in a religious context that is offered for a greater purpose. This death is executed by one or more individuals, with the possible but not guaranteed agreement of the victim. Ritual death, when not inflicted by another party, could be regarded as a special category of suicide, but more on that later.

In modern usage 'homicide' can be subdivided into murder and manslaughter. In Old Norse there was no specific term for this juridically connotated modern term. The Old Norse word for murder was "morð".<sup>43</sup> Murder requires per definition premeditation, manslaughter is rather a killing in the effect. The focus here will be on premeditated murder. The act of 'homicide' can probably most comprehensively and effectively be defined as the act of killing another person intentionally and with premeditation. The modern Norwegian criminal code, NLO Staffeloven §233, defines murder as the following: *Den, som forvolder en andens Død, eller som medvirker dertil, straffes for Drab med Fængsel i mindst 8 Aar. Har den skyldige handlet med Overlæg, eller har han forøvet Drabet for at lette eller skjule en anden Forbrydelse eller unddrage sig Straffen for en saadan, kan Fængsel inntil 21 år anvendes. Det samme gjælder i Gjentakelsestilfælde samt, hvor forøvrigt særdeles skjærpende Omstændigheder foreligger.*<sup>44</sup> This modern-day law code is used here to demonstrate the modern definition of a homicide. It will be helpful to determine differences and similarities in the definition of homicide in a medieval Scandinavian context and modern times. Of course, the people in the Viking Age did not have the same definition of this kind of deed, the way it was perceived will be examined later.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Geir T. Zoëga (2004), *A concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 'morð'

<sup>44</sup> [https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLO/lov/1902-05-22-10/KAPITTEL\\_2-15#%C2%A7233](https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLO/lov/1902-05-22-10/KAPITTEL_2-15#%C2%A7233)

English translation: He who causes another one's death, or who collaborates in it, gets punished for killing with imprisonment for at least 8 years. Did the guilty party act on purpose, or did he commit the killing for relieve or to cover up another crime or in order to withdraw himself from punishment, can imprisonment be extended till 21 years. The same applies in case of recurrence and where special aggravating circumstances are existing.

<sup>45</sup> The term 'homicide' is a legal term, created in modern-day societies including in its meaning all the above-mentioned criteria. There is no way of knowing exactly the motives of a murderer in the Viking Age after this time, so to use the legal term might not always be appropriate since it implies a concrete modern-day definition. Therefore, I will be using 'intentional killing' as a more neutral term when adequate.

To define suicide, the definition created by Èmile Durkheim seems helpful: “The term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.”<sup>46</sup>. Suicide is the act of taking one’s own life intentionally. For example, the German term for suicide, “Selbstmord” *self-murder* underlines the defining components of premeditation and killing. These two components emphasize the actual murder-aspect in a suicide which separates it from an accident and indicating that a suicide is usually not committed out of a spontaneous reaction on a situation, but previously planned.

I am looking into these kinds because they are similar in the sense that they are both violent deaths and require premeditation, but as well quite different regarding motive and dealings with it.

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<sup>46</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, xii.

## CHAPTER 1: HOMICIDE

In this chapter, I will examine homicides in the Viking Age. First, I will analyse the legal situation, to find out how the early laws in Iceland dealt with this topic. For this purpose, I will consult *Grágás*. Afterwards the focus will shift towards homicides in the sagas. I will briefly present four different cases and identify each more detailed regarding motives and homicide-criteria. In order to make this topic more comprehensible, I will check the cases against modern-day understanding of homicide when possible. Afterwards, the investigation will focus on one case from the archaeological context. I will describe the case and discuss the question whether or not it was a case of homicide. In this chapter I will argue the following: While modern societies define murder by actions previous to the killing, in the Viking Age it was defined by the actions following the killing. The covering of the body as well as the declaration of the deed were essential. Were these actions not followed precisely, the killing was perceived and treated as a murder.

### 1.1. LAWS

The old Icelandic and Norwegian laws can provide a good insight into the society of pre-Christian Scandinavia, especially of how certain crimes were perceived and how the society dealt for example, with criminals. Most importantly for this particular case: how it dealt with homicide. The usage of these sources is problematic, as it is the case with all written sources about the pre-Christian era in Scandinavia. The laws were written down only after the Christianization, although they were based on oral traditions. The Icelandic laws are referred to as *Grágás* and are described as the most exhaustive of all Germanic legal texts. Instead of being simply written down laws, they offer guidelines on the ending of disputes, legal history and standard practices for certain procedures.<sup>47</sup> The law-codes have survived in two manuscripts dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, although the content from some parts is older than the manuscripts, probably dating to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>48</sup>

Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* does not mention significant changes during codification. However, Ann-Marie Long still sees a high possibility that the laws were modified shortly before they were written down.<sup>49</sup> The basis of the Icelandic laws likely comes from Norway,

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<sup>47</sup> Ann-Marie Long (2017), *Iceland's Relationship with Norway c.870-c1100*, 117.

<sup>48</sup> Long (2017), *Iceland's Relationship*, 117.

<sup>49</sup> Long (2017), *Iceland's Relationship*, 116.

finding its way to the island with the settlers. There was no standard law-code in Norway, the laws there were based on different *þing* districts: *Guláþing* in the west, *Frostáþing* in the Trøndelag region and *Eiðsiváþing* in the east.<sup>50</sup> In the course of the settlement of Iceland in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and later, the settlers each brought their law-codes with them and afterwards created a new one for their new realm.<sup>51</sup> Being based on former Norwegian laws, *Grágás* is a good source for getting a basic and overall idea on the societies' attitudes and dealings with homicide and imposed penalties.

### 1.1.1. GRÁGÁS

*Grágás* was created by the Norwegian settlers coming to the island and forming a new community. According to *Íslendingabók*, the first laws were brought to the new Icelandic inhabitants by Úlfljótr from Norway.<sup>52</sup> These laws, modelled on *Guláþing*<sup>53</sup> were adapted and augmented. The General Assembly *Alþing* was introduced in 930,<sup>54</sup> taking over the legislative and judicial functions. At this assembly laws were established as well as a court in front of which cases were presented and verdicts decided. After the conversion to Christian faith in 999/1000<sup>55</sup> some of the pre-Christian elements in the laws were erased, while most of them were simply remodelled after Christian notions.<sup>56</sup> The exact procedure of the work of the court, the witnesses and the rules around these hearing will not be further reviewed here.

The main interest in the next passage lays on the kind and severity of penalties and the determination and differentiation between killing and murdering as described in *Grágás*. And furthermore, how the information that can be drawn from it can be used on the Viking Age. Similar to the bias the Old Norse sagas contain due to the time and place of their writing, the law-codes are biased as well. They reflect not necessarily a society as it actually was but represent juridical lens through which the world is seen. The law-codes depict a real world, not a fictional, but they are not necessarily representing the actual society. Just as the laws today have gaps, we cannot assume the law-codes to be representative for all inhabitants.

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<sup>50</sup> Long (2017), *Iceland's Relationship*, 125.

<sup>51</sup> Long (2017), *Iceland's Relationship*, 126.

<sup>52</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins (transl.) (1980), *Grágás*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 3.

The usual penalty for so-called “minor offences”,<sup>57</sup> probably stealing of small value, was a fine of three marks that had to be paid to the claimant. A loss of immunity means that their free legal status was taken away (temporarily) and anyone, anywhere was allowed to harm them without having to fear legal consequences. This loss of immunity was often part of the two main penalties: lesser and full outlawry.<sup>58</sup> The first included the confiscation of property of the accused and furthermore exile for three years, but with the right to prepare the exile and free passage to the destiny.<sup>59</sup> Deeds that were punished with lesser outlawry were for example: a man cutting another, throwing things at him, swinging a weapon or striking the other.<sup>60</sup>

The full outlawry was the heaviest sentence: it meant the loss of all property and status, including the loss of immunity. Besides were people not allowed to assist the convict in any way. The person had to survive on their own, mostly only being able to live in the highlands of Iceland. The convicts were basically faced with a death sentence, since the living conditions there are extremely hard, and they could be killed by others at any time. Full outlawry was pronounced when a man shakes another, fells or throttles him, and finally for killing.<sup>61</sup> If a man is killed during an encounter, the other man has to cover the body for protection against animals<sup>62</sup> and afterwards publish the events within three days to the inhabitant of the next house that he can find. He as well must find witnesses that classify the wounds and they furthermore have to decide which of the wounds the deceased acquired was the one that killed.<sup>63</sup>

Interesting is the differentiation between a killing, which apparently seems to have happened occasionally, and a murder: “It is prescribed that if a man murders a man the penalty is outlawry (full outlawry). And it is murder if a man hides it or conceals the corpse or does not admit it.”<sup>64</sup> The qualification as a murder is therefore the attempt of hiding the deed, not the killing itself. When looking at the modern-day law code it becomes clear that murder is defined by the premeditation of the deed. Therefore, the case of murder in today’s understanding develops before the murder is committed. In the laws that are presented in *Grágás* however, the

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<sup>57</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 8.

<sup>58</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Vilhjálmur Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 144. “ef maðr högr til manz eða legr eða scytr eða verpr eða drepr” ( if a man cuts at a man, or thrusts at him, or shoots or throws at him, or strikes him. See: Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 139.)

<sup>61</sup> Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 145.

<sup>62</sup> Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 154. “Hann skal hylia hræ ef hann gengr fra manne dauðum. sva at hvarke æte fuglar ne dýr.“ (If he leaves a man dead he is to cover his corpse so that neither birds nor beasts may eat it. See: Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 146.)

<sup>63</sup> Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 154. This examination of the wounds and the wound-witnesses were probably important for the later trial.

<sup>64</sup> Translation taken from: Dennis, Foote, Perkins (1980), *Grágás*, 146. See as well: Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 154: “þat er mælt. ef maðr myþir man oc varðar þat scog gang. en þa er morð ef maðr leynir eða hylr hræeða gengr eigi I gegn.”

murder gets qualified as such in the actions after the killing of the victim. A killing had to be published in front of witnesses with a certain wording.<sup>65</sup> If not, the killer would become a murderer. The lack of a centralised executive in the Icelandic law-system left the control and fulfilment of laws and rules in the hands of the individual or groups of individuals.<sup>66</sup> Ian Miller suggests the feuds practiced in medieval Iceland between families and households with accurate scorekeeping and equal repaying of insults, wounds and killings served as this missing executive power.<sup>67</sup>

The presence of rules on how to deal with people who killed or murdered others, as well as a categorization of types of blows and their individual penalty,<sup>68</sup> indicates an awareness of the context and physical injuries, as well as a concern regarding these. This can furthermore lead to the suggestion that living in these times and areas were already organised and bureaucratic, but as well violent.

## 1.2. HOMICIDE IN THE SAGAS

After reviewing the legal situation in early medieval Iceland and the definition of homicide, the focus will now shift towards the Icelandic sagas. I will do that in order to see if and how homicide was committed, and which consequences arose from it to the involved parties. This allows an assessment of the general handling of homicide in the sagas, which will enable me to compare homicide in the Viking era with today's judgement of homicide. To compare and understand the cases properly, three homicide-defining aspects will be analysed:

1. premeditation, 2. knowledge/awareness of the aftermath, 3. motives.

I will argue that there was homicide happening in the sagas from a modern-day point of view, but it was labelled and handled differently in the sagas. Since I am using two different kinds of medieval written sources, I will furthermore try to determine to what extent the written sources are in agreement with each other. This will be done by examining different cases of killing in the sagas, asking whether it could be seen as a modern-day homicide and how accurate the account from the sagas aligns with the law codes.

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<sup>65</sup> Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> Falk (2002), "Cultural Construction", 10.

The terms applied are in modern day context for a better understanding. It does not work in the context of the times and it is not the aim here to present the Alþing as a malfunctioning political system. The tripartite system known today is not the only working regime.

<sup>67</sup> Miller (1990), *Bloodtaking*, 181.

<sup>68</sup> Finsen (1974), *Grágás. Konungsbók*, 149.

The argument here is that the dealings after the deed define the difference between a killing and a homicide. Disrespectful behaviour weighed more than the actual taking of a life. The emphasis was not dependent on the respect of life, but on the respect for the dead.

### 1.2.1. GUÐRÚN, BOLLI AND KJARTAN FROM *LAXDÆLA SAGA*

The first case of an intentional killing in the sagas is taken from *Laxdæla saga*, one of the most famous family sagas written in Iceland. The unknown author composed it around 1245.<sup>69</sup> The narrative focuses on the arrival of a Norwegian family settling in Iceland in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and their lives up until the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>70</sup> Probably the most important aspect of this saga is the love-triangle between Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, Bolli Þorleiksson and Kjartan Ólafsson, its conflicting kinship and loyalties, revenges and frustrated love.

Bolli and Kjartan grow up together in one household after Kjartan's father Óláfr Høskuldsson offers to foster the boy. Their friendship is very strong, and they are deeply devoted to each other. However, Bolli is always standing in Kjartan's shadow.<sup>71</sup> Before Kjartan and Bolli leave Iceland to travel to Norway, Kjartan and Guðrún meet and fall in love. He asks her to wait for him for three years which she declines, and the two young men leave. During that time the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason pressures Iceland to convert to the new Christian faith, increasing the pressure on the Icelandic chieftains by holding Kjartan and three other young Icelanders hostage.<sup>72</sup> Bolli is free to go. After his return to Iceland he tells Guðrún that Kjartan plans on settling in Norway, proposes to her and she agrees to the marriage after being pressured into it.<sup>73</sup>

However, Kjartan does return to Iceland and after discovering the marriage between Bolli and Guðrún he decides to marry Hrefna Ásgeirsdóttir.<sup>74</sup> Inevitably the tense situation escalates in acts of insults, revenge, theft and open enmity. The climax of this feud is reached when Guðrún goads her brothers and her husband Bolli into attacking Kjartan for final revenge.<sup>75</sup> They ambush him while he is traveling with little company. Bolli is standing aside the fight since he does not want to kill his friend, but Guðrún's brothers make him join. Kjartan and Bolli

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<sup>69</sup> Magnus Magnusson, Hermann Pálsson (1975) (transl.), *Laxdæla saga*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> Magnusson, Pálsson (1975), *Laxdæla saga*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934) (ed.), *Laxdæla saga: Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, 77.

<sup>72</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 125.

<sup>73</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 129.

<sup>74</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 137.

<sup>75</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 150.

finally stand face-to-face, ready to fight, but Kjartan says to him: “Víst ætlar þú nú, frændi, niðingsverk at gera, en miklu þykki mér netra at þigja banaorð af þér, frændi, en veita þér þat.”<sup>76</sup> (It is an ignoble deed, kinsman, that you are about to do; but I would much rather accept death at your hands, cousin, than give you death at mine).<sup>77</sup>

With these words he throws away his weapon and Bolli strikes him a fatal blow, holding him in his lap as he dies, immediately regretting his deed.<sup>78</sup> Later he tells Guðrún about the events and even though she shows no sign of grief he sees her pain about Kjartan’s death.<sup>79</sup>

This very tragic killing of Kjartan and the events that led up to it are of particular interest. The main question at this point is: was the killing of Kjartan a homicide, and if so, who is actually to be held responsible for it? To recall the definition of the Norwegian criminal law of homicide, it is a premeditated deed that is committed for various reasons, which are per definition of low motive, to cover up another crime. The main motives today for committing a homicide are mortification, greed, revenge, sexual motives, jealousy, hate and love.<sup>80</sup>

In the saga there was a short feud between the former three friends, starting with insulting behaviour from Kjartan to a gift Bolli offered to him and ending with Kjartan getting killed by Bolli. From today’s perspective the end of this dispute seems rather excessive regarding that it started over an insult and theft. It seems rather drastic that it escalates with Guðrún sending her brothers and husband to make an attempt on Kjartan’s life. By sending the men to kill Kjartan, Guðrún incites them to commit murder. This incitement includes premeditation and the knowledge of the deed and its outcomes. This would qualify the killing of Kjartan as a homicide from today’s judicial perspective. Guðrún would be the person responsible for it. Her motives, however, that made her send the men are difficult to determine, since the specific style of the Icelandic sagas includes to not give insight into the emotional life of the figures or their thoughts. It is likely that there is no single motive that triggered her decision. A combination of jealousy, love, revenge and mortification could be possible.<sup>81</sup> Killing someone for revenge and to avenge previously done crimes and insults, seems in the context of the Viking Age to have been, a weighty motive.

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<sup>76</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 154.

<sup>77</sup> see: Magnusson, Pálsson (1975), *Laxdæla saga*, 166.

<sup>78</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 154.

<sup>79</sup> Magnusson, Pálsson, *Laxdæla saga*, 167.

<sup>80</sup> see: [https://www.focus.de/wissen/mensch/tid-9066/kriminologie\\_aid\\_263042.html](https://www.focus.de/wissen/mensch/tid-9066/kriminologie_aid_263042.html)

<sup>81</sup> Jealousy because she is not content with Kjartan having married another woman. Love for him which he does not seem to respond to anymore. Revenge for the insults and humiliation he put her and Bolli through. Mortification because he hurt her feelings when he left, came back and married the other woman and humiliated her. All this is highly speculative.

As seen in *Grágás* the differentiation between a murder and a “normal” killing during an encounter lies in the events following the killing. A murder is an unpublished killing of a person, whose body was additionally not covered up. The case of Kjartan’s killing would, according to modern legal thought, be a murder, a homicide. In the time the sagas and the laws were written down in Scandinavia and especially Iceland, it would have been a usual killing in an encounter happening during a feud, a series of insults and humiliation. The brothers of Guðrún were at a later assembly sentenced to outlawry, but Bolli was spared from this: he was defended by Óláfr and allowed to stay in Iceland.<sup>82</sup> Guðrún did not face any charges over the killing, showing a big difference between the law systems. She did not kill him nor was she part of the ambush, so according to the early laws, she was officially not responsible for anything that happened. Whether nobody except for the brothers and Bolli knew of her involvement or whether nobody cared about this fact is not clear.

This passage from the saga provides an insight on the way people in the 13<sup>th</sup> century imagined people living two centuries earlier have lived. To compare the different times (Viking Age and Middle Ages) and its laws is difficult and risky when used without caution. But to gain some information and ideas on the handling of homicides in the Viking Age this saga with its complex net and display of kinship, loyalty, love and revenge allows insights on diverse areas into which there is hardly any other access possible. This thought should be kept in mind while other homicide cases are examined.

### 1.2.2. KOTKELL AND HIS FAMILY IN *LAXDÆLA SAGA*

The next case of homicide is as well taken from *Laxdæla saga*. Kotkell, his wife Gríma and their sons Hallbjörn slíkisteinsauga and Stígandi came from the Hebrides to Iceland and are skilled in witchcraft and sorcery.<sup>83</sup> They make the lives of their neighbours unbearable, steal and practice their sorcery-craft. Þórðr Ingunnarson finally travels up to them and summons the whole family for witchcraft, punished by outlawry. He refers the case to the Alþing and leaves with his ship again. The family dislikes that and they chant incantations to make a big storm appear. The storm heads directly towards Þórðr’s ship and the whole crew drowns in the sea.<sup>84</sup> On a later occasion, they direct their sorcery toward Kari, the son of Hrút who - after the wish

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<sup>82</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 159.

<sup>83</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 95.

<sup>84</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 100.

of Þorleikr - shall be humiliated.<sup>85</sup> Kari dies and his father and Óláfr Hǫlskuldsson decide that the family should die now.<sup>86</sup> First, they capture Hallbjǫrn and put a bag over his head. Then the parents are caught and stoned to death on a ridge<sup>87</sup> as well as their son Stígandi later, after he became a troublesome outlaw.<sup>88</sup> Hallbjǫrn was brought out to sea and drowned but only after he manages to curse Þorleikr.<sup>89</sup>

These four cases of killing were committed to punish the killings the family was accused of and as well to keep them from killing and stealing further. The motives of the different parties involved in the killing were diverse. Hrút probably wanted to avenge his son Kari, other members were afraid and tried to get rid of a serious life-threat. The fact that the whole family was a group of powerful sorcerers suggests the thought that the rest of the population was afraid of them, which explains why they were active for so long. Interestingly, three out of four family members were stoned to death,<sup>90</sup> while the fourth was drowned. The involvement of stones in the death of the parents and Stígandi indicates a certain treatment of sorcerers or evil-doers. This can be traced in an archaeological context as well as will be shown later in this work.

This scene is furthermore interesting because it not only shows how, according to the saga, the society dealt with dangerous people, in this case sorcerers who killed many already, but as well displays a killing at the same time. The murderers are murdered.

The family is responsible for different killings. They were aware of their actions and knew the outcome. This shows premeditation. Shortly after their deeds the family becomes the victim of similarly planned and executed murder, in the form of stoning to death as a death penalty, revenge or protective action.

### 1.2.3. KATLA AND ODDR FROM *EYRBYGGJA SAGA*

I will now be looking at another example of the killing of practitioners of witchcraft. This family saga follows different families from Norway to Iceland in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century and through the time of conversion.<sup>91</sup> It was probably written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and displays the families

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<sup>85</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 106.

<sup>86</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 106: “óláfr kvað þá þegar skyldu drepa þau Kotkel ok konu hans ok sonu.” (Olaf said that Kotkel and his wife and sons must be put to death immediately – ‘however belatedly’. See: Magnusson, Pálsson (1975), *Laxdæla saga*, 125.)

<sup>87</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 106.

<sup>88</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> Sveinsson (1934), *Laxdæla saga*, 107.

<sup>90</sup> More on that topic later in this text.

<sup>91</sup> Jennifer Livesay (1988), “Women and Narrative Structure in Eyrbyggja saga”, 183, *Folklore Forum* 21:2, 181-193.

living at the northern part of Snæfellsness peninsula, being caught up in a net of loyalties, conflicts, rivalries and hostilities.<sup>92</sup> Supernatural occurrences and witchcraft play a big role in this saga, ranging from draugar to sorcery.<sup>93</sup> One of the women possessing such a power is Katla, a widow living in Holt with her grown-up son Oddr who is described as being vigorous, noisy, mischievous and slanderous.<sup>94</sup> Jealousy between Katla and Geirrið and an interpersonal battle lead to the hanging of Oddr.<sup>95</sup> After her son, Katla has to die as well, being stoned to death.<sup>96</sup> Interesting to note, there are no protests or attempt of avenging the two undertaken in the saga.<sup>97</sup> Reasons for this can be debated, most likely it was not important for the story.

More interesting is the recurring fact of a death by stoning. As mentioned earlier, stoning was used to execute sorcerers, and the appearance of stones in graves still provides cause for discussions. The death of Katla and her son Oddr are strikingly similar to a grave found in Gerdrup, Denmark, in which a man with a broken neck and a woman who was stoned to death are buried.<sup>98</sup> What is interesting here is the fact that the pair from the saga, being described as dangerous sorcerers show similarities to the burial of two people found in a grave in Denmark dated to 800 AD. The comparison of a Danish grave from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and an Icelandic written source from the 13<sup>th</sup> century is, as Ole Thirup Kastholm<sup>99</sup> states, a challenge which requires thorough reflection. That said, the basic similarities of the grave and the deaths of Katla and Oddr are an astonishing aspect.

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<sup>92</sup> Livesay (1988), “Women”, 183.

<sup>93</sup> Livesay (1988), “Women”, 184.

<sup>94</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson (ed.) (1935), *Eyrbyggja saga: Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, 28. “Oddr hét sonr hennar; hann var mikill maðr ok knár, hávaða maðr mikill ok málugr, slysin ok rógsamr.” (...and had a son called Odd, a big robust man, loud-mouthed, a born trouble-maker and given to gossip and slander. See: Hermann Pálsson, Pauls Edwards (transl.) (1989), *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 45, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.)

<sup>95</sup> Sveinsson, Þórðarson (1935), *Eyrbyggja saga*, 50-54

<sup>96</sup> Sveinsson, Þórðarson (1935), *Eyrbyggja saga*, 54.

<sup>97</sup> Livesay (1988), “Women”, 187.

<sup>98</sup> On the Gerdrup-grave see: Tom Christensen (1981), “Gerdrup-graven”, 19-28, *Årsskrift fra Roskilde Museum*. On the similarities of the grave and the saga see: Leszek Gardela (2012), “Entangled worlds. Archaeologies of Ambivalence in the Viking Age”, 131, Doctoral thesis University of Aberdeen.

<sup>99</sup> Ole Thirup Kastholm (2016), “Afvigende normaler I vikingtidens gravsikk? Dobbeltgraven fra Gerdrup 35 år efter”, 69, in: Henriette Lyngstrøm, Jens Ulriksen (ed.): *Artikler fra et seminar på Københavns Universitet den 26.februar 2016*.

#### 1.2.4. HÖSKULDR ÞRÁINSSON ‘HVÍTANESSGOÐI’ IN *BRENNU-NJÁLS SAGA*

The author of the famous family saga is unknown. The consistent writing style of the saga suggest that it was written by a single author who was taught to write in a cloister.<sup>100</sup> Gudbrandur Vígfússon made suggests, that the saga is the last of the family sagas and therefore must have been composed in the end of the thirteenth century.<sup>101</sup> The saga is set in the years before and shortly after the introduction of Christianity in Iceland, approximately between 950 and 1030 AD. During that time the tension between the opposing parties of Christians and pagan Icelanders grew intense and the family feuds in the country were very violent. The saga describes and explores topics such as honour, feud and vengeance and the outcomes of these actions in a very descriptive and bold way.

Previous to the murder which shall be discussed here, some political changes took place in Iceland. Valgarðr inn grái the father of Mǫrðr and former goði of the region Hvítatness returns from travels and finds his goðord, which he had left in his son’s hands to be gone. Mǫrðr explains that his followers had left him after the establishment of the fifth court in Iceland, and that they now support Höskuldr Þráinsson. Valgarðr demands that his son retaliates and sets Höskuldr and the sons of Njáll against each other to destroy them all.<sup>102</sup>

Mǫrðr does as he is told and starts building up a close friendship with the Njáll’s sons, while he is at the same time discrediting them to Höskuldr. He does not believe what Mǫrðr tells him and replies: “En þó at því sé at Skipta ok segir þú satt, at annat hvárt sé, at þeir drepí mik eða ek þá, þá vil ek hálfu heldr þola dauða af þeim en ek gera þeim nokkut mein.”<sup>103</sup>

Mǫrðr, however, has more luck persuading Njáll’s sons of the evil character of Höskuldr by telling them that he tried to burn them at night during his celebrations of the new goðord. One morning, when Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði goes out on his field to sow grains, he is attacked by Njáll’s sons. Skarpheðinn strikes him a blow on the head and Höskuldr says his final words:

“Guð hjálpi mér, en fyrirgefi yðr!”<sup>104</sup> After that they all wound him.

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<sup>100</sup> Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál’s saga*, 8. The author, as a well-educated man, probably had access to many other sagas and manuscripts that are long lost today, Bayerschmidt and Hollander base that on certain similarities and differences in style regarding other reports and textual passages.

<sup>101</sup> Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál’s saga*, 8.

<sup>102</sup> Einar Ól Sveinsson (1954) (ed.), *Brennu-Njáls Saga: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag*, 326.

<sup>103</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 278. (Even if you were telling the truth and it were a question as to whether I should slay them or they me, I would much rather suffer death at their hands than do them the least harm. See: Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál’s saga*, 225.)

<sup>104</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 281. (May God help me and forgive you! See: Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál’s saga*, 227.)

Mǫrðr is however not finished with his plan. He tells Njáll's sons that he will report the death of Hǫskuldr at the next farm, but instead tells his shepherd to tell Hǫskuldr's wife that the Njáll's sons rode off the scene, Skarpheðinn declaring his responsibility for the slaying. Njáll is sad to learn about the death of Hǫskuldr and in a conversation with his son Skarpheðinn he prophesises the outcome of this situation which will be the death of himself, his wife and family.<sup>105</sup> The killing is followed by a suit which Mǫrðr gets to prepare for the assembly.

The wounds of the deceased are presented and for each wound the man who inflicted it is named. This is done for all wounds except for one, of which Mǫrðr pretends he would not know the inflictor, although it has been himself.

The whole incident entails revenge and counter-revenge finally resulting in the burning of Njáll and his wife, just as he has foreseen earlier. The exact events after this killing are too elaborate to be handled here, since the focus is on the actual killing of Hǫskuldr. The malicious plan from Mǫrðr and his father, to avenge in playing the Njáll's sons and Hǫskuldr off against each other, including the death of the new goði, is not only working out to their satisfaction, but as well launches out a wave of violent attacks and revenges. The starting point of this new wave of violence, the killing of Hǫskuldr, is, as it would be defined today, a homicide. It includes premeditation and full intention and cannot be seen as an accidental killing or a manslaughter. This scene and the following ones show very detailed how these feuds in the Icelandic Viking Age might have developed, and how politics and violence were interwoven. In the struggle for power and influence people did anything to succeed. This underlines the importance of power in that society. This saga was written after the Christianisation, and there are many examples of Christian influence from the author in the text. The lens through which the reader is looking at the Viking Age in this saga is a violent one. The reason might be that the author wanted to stress how violent these 'barbaric' times were, before the people knew the new faith, or because he wanted to underline the violence because he found it more interesting and entertaining.

The killing of Hǫskuldr was used as an ignition for more feuding, being engineered by Mǫrðr and his father as a revenge for the loss of power. This homicide displays a further motive which can be traced in the sagas. The four cases are just few examples of three different sagas. They were picked to demonstrate some motives for murder in the written sources to show how this was handled in the sagas and furthermore, that the motives are probably still the same today.

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<sup>105</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 281. "Hvat mun eptir koma?" segir Skarpheðinn. „Dauði minn,“ segir Njáll, „ok konu minnar ok allra sona minna.“ („And what will happen hereafter?“ asked Skarpheðinn. “My death,” answered Njál, “and that of my wife and all my sons!”). See: Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál's saga*, 228.)

### 1.3. HOMICIDE IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The determination of a juridically classifiable homicide in an archaeological context is difficult. There is hardly any way of knowing the causes of a death in general, especially when there are no indications of trauma or anything that could indicate a violent death. Furthermore, identifying a killing and to demarcate it against an accident can probably only be carried out with reference to the general grave composition, potential grave goods or injuries on the skeleton. Further complicating the identification of killings in the archaeological context, is the distinction between fractures of the bones that occurred at the time of death or subsequently led to it, and those that happened while the skeleton was buried or during excavation.<sup>106</sup> There are, however, fractures that mostly appear as a result of intentional interpersonal violence.<sup>107</sup> Among them are defence-fractures of the underarm, skull traumas with cut marks, projectiles or sword tips embedded in the bone.<sup>108</sup> The head, being the most important and at the same time most vulnerable region, often seems to be the target of interpersonal violence. Therefore skull-injuries are likely to indicate intentional strokes.<sup>109</sup> Not all of those are instantly fatal. Indications that a wound was not fatal are signs of healing at the bone like rounded edges on the fracture. In context of the Viking Age and battles or armed conflicts, battle-ax wounds, sword wounds and crushing injuries from blunt weapons are probably the most common fatal wounds detectable. The distinction whether a fracture was caused by accident or by intentional violence is not easy to be made.<sup>110</sup> However, there are indications, that accidental fractures are more likely to be the result of oblique fractures, whereas fractures occurring from intentional violence result in transverse fractures.<sup>111</sup>

Finding a homicide in archaeological sources in modern-day juridical understanding of homicide, is extremely difficult. In the course of the next section the term ‘intentional killing’ will therefore be preferred over ‘homicide’. Identifying wounds that lead to death from which an intention of killing could be traced, may be a bit easier. The context in which the fatal wounds were inflicted, for example during war, a personal conflict or an intentional killing, might be interpreted from the context.

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<sup>106</sup> Donald J. Ortner (2003), *Identification of Pathological Conditions in Human Skeletal Remains*, 136.

<sup>107</sup> Ortner (2003), *Identification*, 137.

<sup>108</sup> Ortner (2003), *Identification*, 137.

<sup>109</sup> Charlotte Roberts, Keith Manchester (2010), *The Archaeology of Disease*, 108.

<sup>110</sup> Ortner (2003), *Identification*, 143.

<sup>111</sup> Ortner (2003), *Identification*, 136.

### 1.3.1. THE CHIEFTAIN FROM THE GOKSTAD SHIP

In 1880, a ship was excavated which had been found in a mound on the farm Gokstad near Sandefjord by the Oslo Fjord.<sup>112</sup> In the ship, the archaeologist Nicolay Nicolaysen found an incomplete skeleton, next to other artefacts. Different professors examined the eleven fragments originating from seven different bones<sup>113</sup>. The biomedical analysis of the bones attested the individual whose remains were found arthritis, rheumatism and severe physical disabilities due to the state of his joints.<sup>114</sup> In the 1920s, suggestions to rebury the skeleton in its mound were made. The Professor of Anatomy at the time, Kristian Emil Schreiner, unsuccessfully tried to prevent this.<sup>115</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> of June 1928 the bones were reburied.<sup>116</sup> However, the omnipresent fear of the decay of the bones in the mound led to a re-opening in September 2007<sup>117</sup> and a subsequent re-examination. They revealed new information on the skeleton and produced a more accurate picture of the individual.

One of the most striking aspects of this male skeleton is that the bones seem very robust and bigger and heavier than comparable bones from a male medieval skeleton.<sup>118</sup> C14 analysis of the bones suggests that he died between 770 and 970 AD and the dendrochronological analysis of the grave chamber shows the trees were felled around 901 AD.<sup>119</sup> Since the burial could have taken place only after the cutting of the trees, and after the death of the person, the person must have died before 901 AD. The bones show signs of great muscular force, which can be identified by rough surfaces on the bones, where the muscles were attached.<sup>120</sup> There are indications to an older knee injury and signs of arthrosis, a ruptured medial meniscus and a compression fracture on the left condyle.<sup>121</sup> The skeleton shows several injuries, some of which seem to have been fatal. There are cut marks at his legs and a sword wound on his left shin bone and knee, which indicates that the man was either riding while he got the blow or lying in a

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<sup>112</sup> Per Holck (2009), "The Skeleton from the Gokstad ship: New Evaluation of an Old Find", 40.

<sup>113</sup> Per Holck (2009), *Skjelettene fra Gokstad- og Osebergskipet*, 6. List of the pieces of bone: two pieces of skull, four pieces of the left shoulder blade, one whole left upper arm bone, both thighbones, the left shinbone, right fibula bone.

<sup>114</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 41.

<sup>115</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 41.

<sup>116</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 41.

<sup>117</sup> Holck (2009), "Skeleton", 43.

<sup>118</sup> See Appendix figure 1.

<sup>119</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 48.

<sup>120</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 48.

<sup>121</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 44.

supine position.<sup>122</sup> There are marks on his right thigh bone indicating cuts from a knife or arrowhead and one end of his fibula was cut off.<sup>123</sup>

The different marks lead Holck to the suggestion that the man was attacked and killed by at least two different individuals with different weapons, most likely with a sword, an axe and a knife.<sup>124</sup> They inflicted five to six different blow or stab wounds.<sup>125</sup> The fact that the bones show no signs of healing, but all edges of the fractures and cuts in the bones are sharp and splintered led Holck to the conclusion that this man was killed in this attack.<sup>126</sup> Furthermore, most cut-edges show microscopic leaking of collagen, the bone-protein, a process as well called ‘sweating’ of the bone.<sup>127</sup> This leaking indicates that the individual was still alive when the injuries were inflicted and that the cuts and breaks did not happen in the earth or during excavation. The sharp edges however show that the individual did not survive his injuries, since there would otherwise be traces of healing. All the injuries alone lead already to the suggestion that the man was killed, although most of the skeleton is missing, including the skull. Holck has no doubt that this man was intentionally killed.<sup>128</sup> He furthermore suggests that the man was in his 40s<sup>129</sup> and suffered from acromegaly, which is caused by a tumour in the brain, leading to an increased production of the growth hormone and general coarse features.<sup>130</sup> Reasons for his suggestion are not only the heavy and large bones, but the estimated height and stature which can be concluded of them: he was calculated to be around 181 cm high.<sup>131</sup> This is quite abnormal in a time when the average height may have been only around 165cm.<sup>132</sup>

This case of intentional killing of a man who was presumably rather exceptional in stature shows in fascinating detail one very violent aspect of the pre-Christian Scandinavian society. The kind and cause of death was probably no unique event. The fact that the man was buried in a big ship with grave goods demonstrates his status in the society. It shows as well that this status did not keep men like him from dying a violent death, probably on the battlefield. This

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<sup>122</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 45.

<sup>123</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 45.

<sup>124</sup> Holck (2009), *Skjelettene*, 17.

<sup>125</sup> Holck (2009), *Skjelettene*, 17.

<sup>126</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 46.

<sup>127</sup> Holck (2009), *Skjelettene*, 18.

<sup>128</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 46.

<sup>129</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 44.

<sup>130</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 47.

<sup>131</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 46.

<sup>132</sup> Holck (2009), „Skeleton“, 46. The big stature of the Chieftain might additionally be caused by a good nutrition. Being of a higher social status, he probably had access to food with more nutritional value, such as meat or fish on a regular basis. Furthermore, as probable land-owner he and his family controlled arable land and the tenants working it, providing reliably enough food around the year. Lower social classes and slaves were less well-nourished and therefore stayed smaller. See: Eljas Orrman (2003), “Rural Conditions”, 303 f, in: Knut Helle (2003), *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia Vol.1*, 250-311.

of course raises the question how violent the life of the lower and lowest social classes was, which probably experienced and suffered from a different kind of violence than this chieftain. His physical strength that can be seen from his remains, suggest an active life, just like the previous injuries that could be traced based on the few bones. The remains of the Gokstad Chieftain demonstrate that the life in this time and region probably was hard and violent to all inhabitants, particularly to those of the fighting class.

This conclusion does not contradict the ones drawn from the written sources earlier. Hostility, violence and violent death seem so far to have been part of everyday life. The cases examined in this chapter about homicide in the sagas and the archaeological context are by no means exhaustive and were chosen to illustrate different aspects of intentional killing in written and material sources. The aim was to present and discuss different cases of intentional violent killing from different sources and to draw cautious conclusions on handlings of these events in the society. Furthermore, to see how the terms that are common today can be used to describe the deed in the Viking Age and whether the contemporaries had a similar understanding of the deed and whether they treated it similarly or not.

#### 1.4. CONCLUSIONS ON HOMICIDE

As seen in the chapter, the perception of homicide was different in the Viking Age, at least as it is presented in the written sources. The early laws show the differentiation between a usual killing and a homicide was undertaken after the deed. The way the body of the deceased was treated and whether or not the offender published his/her deed determined the act. Furthermore, the cases of homicide in the sagas show that killing was part of the general violence. This is at least how the authors of the sagas want to present the past. The case of the Gokstad Chieftain provided a visual example of a killing, raising once again the question on the perception of homicide in the pre-Christian Scandinavian world. As stated in the hypothesis, there was indeed a different perception of homicide in the sagas, and probably as well in the Viking Age, since some of the worldviews and concepts might have lasted into the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most influential aspect that changed the perception was most likely the introduction of Christianity.

The question whether or not the border towards killing someone was more easily crossed than it is today, can at this point not be proven and should be subject of further research. The severity of the outcome of some of the feuds in the written sources indicate however a stronger

willingness to carry a fight or retaliation to extremes. The concept of homicide was, as seen in the previous passages, not only different in the definition and the legal determination as already suggested, but furthermore different in the actions previous to the deed and afterwards. The concept of homicide was different in the Scandinavian Viking Age insofar that the actions after the deed defined it as a homicide, whereas in modern-day societies actions previous to the deed define it.

This difference indicates that a homicide/killing by focussing on the actions after the killing, somehow made the person who killed in charge of the definition of the deed. He/she could turn to the next farm and report it and get legal treatment, or leave the body uncovered where it fell and be charged for murder. Furthermore, even if a person killed someone intentionally, which would be defined as a homicide today, he could still just report the deed and not be charged for that. This shows a completely different handling and definition of homicide. The act of covering up the body was essential to the definition. This indicates that it was important to show respect to the deceased by protecting his dead body from animals or the weather. Disrespect of the dead body and concealing of the deed seems to have been the main acts that were punished, not the killing itself, because that is the “turning point”. Killing is not welcome but happened in this society. Covering the body and the report of the deed, the actions after the killing, were the two actions which decided over having killed someone and having murdered someone. The conclusion is that the dealings after the deed define it and disrespectful behaviour weighed more than the actual taking of a life. The focus was not on the respect for life, but on respect for the dead.

## CHAPTER 2: SUICIDE

After focussing on the homicides in sagas and archaeological remains from the different regions of Scandinavia, the attention will now shift towards the other main topic of discussion: suicide. First, I will take a brief look at the sociological aspect of this topic, with special attention on Durkheim and his categories of suicide. The next part will focus on suicides which occurred in the *Íslendingasögur* and the Norwegian *Heimskringla*. This will provide a detailed look into the written culture's attitude towards suicide from which conclusions can be drawn for the Viking Age society. In the next part I will examine suicides in the archaeological record and analyse whether suicides can be suggested in some burials.

I argue that even though Christian as well as the pre-Christian belief share a strong faith in the afterlife, the two belief-systems display great differences in their attitudes towards suicide. Suicide was not stigmatised in the pre-Christian belief-systems because the faith was, particularly with regard to suicide, less doctrinaire and regulative on the life of the people.

### 2.1. CATEGORIES OF SUICIDE

In his work "Suicide", Émile Durkheim defined four categories of suicide in his work. After an overview on his categories on suicide, I will test them on the Viking Age in order to see if they can be transferred onto this time or if there are other categories that fit better in this particular context of time and place.

Durkheim's first category is egoistic suicide.<sup>133</sup> This category is, in Durkheim's eyes, a consequence of social disintegration with little contact to society or to family life. It is linked to feelings like helplessness, uselessness and desperation. He describes it as an "exaggerated individualism".<sup>134</sup> "Egoism is not merely a contributing factor in it; it is its generating cause."<sup>135</sup> Individual characteristics are of less importance in this case, but the family structure and the individual roles are more fundamental.<sup>136</sup> The lack of social integration into a family and the society as a whole results in the inability to find a basis for existence, a reason to life. It is furthermore stated in his book, that in times of national crisis or war, the individual is more

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<sup>133</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 168.

<sup>134</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 173.

<sup>135</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 173.

<sup>136</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, xiv.

integrated by participation in a social life.<sup>137</sup> Following this thesis, egoistic suicide can therefore be seen as, colloquially said, a problem of wealth or a ‘first-world-problem’.

His next category is altruistic suicide. He opposes it directly to egoistic suicide. In the case of altruistic suicide, the social integration is too strong, while it was too weak in the first example.<sup>138</sup> Durkheim states that “the ego is not its own property”, “...it is blended with something not itself...”.<sup>139</sup> In the altruistic category, the individual does almost not exist and is nearly entirely absorbed with the collective. Where the egoist feels sadness because he or she sees nothing to attach him- or herself to, the altruist has only one goal and that is beyond his world and turns into a burden for him.<sup>140</sup> Interestingly, Durkheim refers this category to, as he puts it “primitive people”,<sup>141</sup> meaning by that ancient cultures and religions from less developed countries.<sup>142</sup> This category can be divided into three subcategories: obligatory altruistic suicide, optional altruistic suicide and acute altruistic suicide.<sup>143</sup>

Obligatory altruistic suicide is a duty that is expected from the society, for example like it was sometimes expected from widows to follow their husbands into death as practiced in many different cultures, including India, Bali and as well Northern Europe.<sup>144</sup> The optional altruistic suicide is closely related to the first subcategory, but differs in so far as the suicide is no duty required from the society, but certainly would be perceived in a favourable way.<sup>145</sup> The aspect of honour plays an important part, since not carrying out the suicide might leave the person with a lower value of his life in his own and the societies’ eyes. The third of Durkheim’s subcategories is acute altruistic suicide. Other than the two previous ones where the suicide was done out of duty or honour, imposed on the victim by the society, this third one is committed “...purely for the joy of sacrifice...”.<sup>146</sup> The background to this is mostly religious conviction known in different belief-systems all over the world: Hinduism, Buddhism as well as Christianity.<sup>147</sup> The victim leaves his own personal individuality and seeks death to become part of something he defines as greater and pure, dying happily to have served this purpose.

Durkheim’s third category of suicide is the anomic suicide. In opposition to the first two categories which dealt with the degree of dependence on society, anomic suicide “results from

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<sup>137</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, xv.

<sup>138</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 175.

<sup>139</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 180.

<sup>140</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 184.

<sup>141</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 177.

<sup>142</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 177.

<sup>143</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 185.

<sup>144</sup> Davidson (1968), *Road to Hel*, 51.

<sup>145</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 181.

<sup>146</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 181.

<sup>147</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 182.

man's activity's lacking regulation and his consequent sufferings".<sup>148</sup> The norms in the society are confused or absent, causing unfulfilled wishes and needs, leaving disappointment, anger and desperation as triggers for suicide.

His final category is only mentioned in footnotes and, as he states, that is because this type has so little importance among his contemporaries. He calls it fatalistic suicide.<sup>149</sup> According to him this category results from "excessive regulation" and committed by people whose "future (is) pitilessly blocked, and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline."<sup>150</sup> As examples, Durkheim mentions slaves or all those who suffered from despotism.<sup>151</sup>

In the next section, different cases of suicide in the sagas will be presented and I will examine which of the cases fit into Durkheim's categories or whether new categories have to be created. This categorization will be helpful to get a better understanding of the motives for suicide in the Viking Age society, at least as it was described in the sagas.

## 2.2. SUICIDE IN THE SAGAS – INTRODUCTION

To complete the picture and equip it with details on the feelings and thoughts of the former people, the sagas cannot be left out, but they have to be included in the process of acquiring more insight. The in chapter 2 mentioned violent deaths are committed by human beings who have reasons for their deeds. Written sources, even though written decades or centuries after the time period in which they are set, still give a better insight into the emotional world of murderers and "self-murderers" in the Viking Age than any other source. They are the only source of information where emotions and reasons are actually described.

However, having been written in a time when Christianity and its moral and ethical worldviews were dominant as well in Scandinavia, the sources must be regarded as being influenced from the Christian point of view. This influence affects different aspects of the life of the people in the early and high Middle Ages, most importantly for this topic, the attitude towards suicide. As Alexander Murray succinctly observes: „as a particular act of violence, suicide is the ultimate act of religious defiance, and hence renders the suicide God's worst enemy."<sup>152</sup> Murray provides a dense breakdown which can be used as a working ground here:

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<sup>148</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 219.

<sup>149</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 239. In footnotes.

<sup>150</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 239.

<sup>151</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 239.

<sup>152</sup> Murray (1998), *Volume 1*, 12.

“The Church” condemned suicide, banned victims of suicide from consecrated churchyards and their souls to hell.<sup>153</sup>

To have a good overview on the suicides that were committed in the Viking Age period, different sagas will be consulted. Six cases of suicides in the sagas and the Old Norse myths will be presented: Óðinn in *Hávamál* and *Ynglinga saga*, Haki Haðaberserkr in *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, Njáll from *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Eyvindr and Gauti from *Vatnsdæla saga* and Nanna Nepsdóttir from *Gylfaginning*.

The events before and, if necessary, after the deed will be briefly summarised and subsequently discussed and compared. The reasons for choosing these particular cases of suicide are because they are of the most famous sagas. They are therefore not only well known but furthermore, researched intensely, helping to make reasonable interpretations based on solid groundwork. The different kinds of suicide in the cases can provide a broader insight into the diversity of suicides in the sagas. For a better comparability and analysis, the focus will be primarily on male suicides.

### 2.2.1. ÓÐINN IN HÁVAMÁL AND YNGLINGA SAGA

The first case of suicide in written sources that will be presented here is the suicide and the death of the god Óðinn. The poem *Hávamál* is part of a collection of Old Norse mythological poems probably written down in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The *Ynglinga saga* is part of the *Heimskringla* which is a compilation of sixteen sagas and was presumably written by the famous Icelandic author and law-speaker Snorri Sturluson in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland.<sup>154</sup> In this work Snorri tells about the lives of the Norwegian kings. In each of the sixteen different sagas the focus is on one of the Norwegian kings, illustrating the history of Norway from its beginning up until 1177.<sup>155</sup>

The two cases are each of special interest. They do not only reflect the attitude of the people who were writing the accounts down, but as well the thoughts these figures in the setting from the Viking Age were having towards death and suicide. The cases display furthermore mythological thoughts that reoccur in different situations.<sup>156</sup> The displayed pre-Christian attitude stands in contrast to the mentioned Christian position towards suicide.

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<sup>153</sup> Murray (1998), *Volume 1*, 12-13.

<sup>154</sup> Diana Whaley (1991), *Heimskringla III, an Introduction*, 9. ‘Presumably’ because the authorship is not mentioned in the work, but style and time of composition suggest Snorri as the author.

<sup>155</sup> Alison Finley, Anthony Faulkes (2011) (transl.), *Heimskringla Vol. 1*, vii.

<sup>156</sup> for example, burial practices.

Stanza 138 from *Hávamál* describes how Óðinn hangs himself for nine nights to gain knowledge of the runes: “Veit ek at ek hekk / vindga meiði á / nætr allar níu / geiri undaðr / ok gefinn Óðni, / sjálfr sjálfum mér, / á þeim meiði / er manngi veit / hvers hann a rótum renn.”<sup>157</sup>

Furthermore, in *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn is dying of sickness and cuts himself with a spear: “Óðinn varð sótt dauðr í Svíþjóð. Ok er hann var at kominn dauða, lét hann marka sik geirsoddi ok eingaði sér alla vápndauða menn.”<sup>158</sup>

The two different versions of Óðinn’s death display actions and beliefs from the Viking Age regarding dying, at least as they are presented by the author of the sources. The first example is of Óðinn’s suicide on the tree. It is interesting in so far, as it shows that hanging is an extreme act, but worthy for Óðinn. He not only survives it or rather returns from the dead,<sup>159</sup> but as well gains something from it. He sacrificed himself to acquire the knowledge of the runes, even though he resurrects again afterwards. That puts suicide by hanging in a special position. Suicide is presented not simply as something awful as it is presented in later Christian times, but in Óðinn’s case as something that must be done in order to get something else. It seems more like his part of a deal, not a shameful deed. He sacrifices something for gaining the knowledge of runes, similar to when he sacrificed one of his eyes for wisdom.<sup>160</sup> This first mentioned sacrifice is less explicit than the latter and what exactly he did sacrifice by hanging but not dying is not clear. The special connection between self-sacrifice by hanging and Óðinn is furthermore underlined by one of his names, mentioned in *Gylfaginning*: Hangaguð.<sup>161</sup> Lorenz describes ‘hanging’ as one essential part of the Óðinn-cult, a god to which sacrifices were made through hanging.<sup>162</sup>

The last example of Óðinn dying from sickness, marking himself with a spear and claiming all men that are killed by weapons, is furthermore quite interesting and gives some hints on the attitude towards different kinds of death. The act of marking himself with the spear is a substitute for fighting and dying in battle. It was considered a bad death to die from sickness, to gain access into Valhöll men had to die in battle. Therefore, marking himself with the

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<sup>157</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, Vésteinn Ólason (2014), *Eddukvæði: Goðakvæði*, Hið íslenska Fornritafélag, 350. (I know that I hung / on a windswept tree / nine long nights / wounded with a spear, / dedicated to Óðinn / myself to myself / on that tree / of which no man knows / from where its roots run. See: Carolyne Larrington (trans.) (2014), *The Poetic Edda*, 32.)

<sup>158</sup> Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson (1991), *Heimskringla I.*, Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 22. (Óðinn was dying from sickness in Sweden. And when he came to die, he let himself be marked with the point of a spear and declared all men who died of weapons to be his own. Translated by the author)

<sup>159</sup> It is questionable whether or not Óðinn actually died in this passage and afterwards came back to life or whether he survived the hanging on the tree. The Old Norse gods can die, at least all die at Ragnarök, so it is possible Óðinn did die hanging.

<sup>160</sup> Gottfried Lorenz (1984), *Gylfaginning*, 231.

<sup>161</sup> Lorenz (1984), *Gylfaginning*, 285.

<sup>162</sup> Lorenz (1984), *Gylfaginning*, 293.

weapon, Óðinn dies with a wound creating an equivalent to being wounded in battle. The second part of the second quote directly points to the belief that warriors dying wounded by weapons in a fight go to Valhöll and fight and feast there together with Óðinn. Óðinn inflicts himself a wound to get into Valhöll (sacrificing himself to himself “sjálfr sjálfum mér” see *Hávamál* 138), while he simultaneously declares all killed warriors to be his own, guaranteeing them access into his afterlife realm. However, the idea that all warriors go to Valhöll is created by Snorri Sturluson, who might have as well written *Heimskringla*.<sup>163</sup> Knowing his background, the idea resembles the Christian afterlife creations, making it questionable how much of this idea actually existed in pre-Christian Scandinavia.<sup>164</sup>

His first “death”, the hanging in *Hávamál*, is difficult to categorize because it is debateable if he does actually die, since he is a god. However, all gods die in Ragnarøk and since Baldr is being killed as well, one could assume that the gods are indeed mortal. Consequently, Óðinn could have died from hanging which would make this a suicide. His suicide by hanging could be categorized as acute altruistic suicide according to Durkheim’s categorisation. As defined above, this category is defined by the person’s search to become part of something greater, serving a purpose with a strong religious connection. Óðinn sacrificed himself to gain the knowledge of the runes, which in his eyes must have been a greater purpose.

The death in *Ynglinga saga* is disqualified for categorization as a suicide, since he dies of sickness and old age. The marking with the spear does not kill him, so it is no suicide. This example is still interesting here, since it demonstrates the wish of dying old men to go to Valhöll and shows what they are willing to do for that.

### 2.2.2. HAKI HAÐABERSERKR IN HEIMSKRINGLA

The suicide that shall be discussed next occurs in the second saga of the compilation, *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, “the saga of Hálfðan the black”. King Hálfðan was the son of Ása and Guðrøðr.<sup>165</sup> Ragnhildr and Guthormr are the children from King Sigurðr hjört in Hringaríki.<sup>166</sup> One day, out on a hunt, King Sigurðr is attacked by Haki Haðaberserkr “the berserk of Haðaland” and thirty of his men. They kill the king and take his children Ragnhildr and Guthormr with them back to

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<sup>163</sup> Abram (2003), “Representations of pagan afterlife”, 51.

<sup>164</sup> Mikael Males raises in his article “Allegory in Old Norse Secular Literature” the idea of Óðinn and Christ being similar and the act of hanging as a typological model taken from the Testament. The arrangement of Óðinn having been through the same as Christ could then be interpreted as a sign of God’s presence through all times. See: Mikael Males (2013), “Allegory in Old Norse Secular Literature”, in: *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 9.

<sup>165</sup> Aðalbjarnarson (1954), *Heimskringla I.*, 84.

<sup>166</sup> Aðalbjarnarson (1954), *Heimskringla I.* 88.

Haðaland. Haki is wounded in the battle, and therefore the planned wedding with Ragnhildr has to be delayed over winter. King Hálfðan hears about what happened to the children and decides to save them, mainly because he wants to marry Ragnhildr. He and his men attack the dwelling of Haki, which is located close to a lake, and steal Ragnhildr and her brother and escape over the ice of the frozen lake. Haki follows them for a while and when he gets onto the shore of the frozen lake, he turns the hilt of his sword down and leans himself onto the tip of the sword, so that the sword cuts right through him.<sup>167</sup> He dies there and is buried under a mound just right where he died, at the shore of the lake.<sup>168</sup>

The specific situation of the self-murder of the berserk warrior will be discussed later, but it is noteworthy for now, that he dies and is buried in close range to water. This area has been discussed as being a special place of “liminal nature”<sup>169</sup> a so-called nowhere place.<sup>170</sup> The significance of this particular area which is neither land nor water, will be looked more closely into later.

The suicide committed by Haki Haðaberserkr could have various reasons. In the sagas the berserkr warriors are special warriors who fight in a trance-like state. The word “berserker” is translated as a masculine noun meaning “a wild warrior of the heathen age”<sup>171</sup>. We can assume that he is a fierce fighter, a strong-built warrior with a sense of honour, as this is attributed to berserkr. He is wounded in battle. Therefore, he cannot marry the young woman he just took from her father. Suddenly, King Hálfðan appears with his men and take the woman from him, and even though he chases after them, he is unable to get her back. He is defeated. That kind of defeat can be imagined to be unacceptable to him, especially because he was not just any kind of man, but a berserkr. Perhaps he decided that he did not want to live with the shame of having been beaten and losing his honour, but instead chooses to kill himself to avoid living with the public and personal humiliation. According to Durkheim’s categories Haki’s death would classify as an optional altruistic suicide. It is not his duty to commit suicide, but he will be perceived favourably. One further interpretation is that he misses this young woman so much that he does not want to live anymore, which would make it an egoistic suicide. This can of course not be completely ruled out, but since there are no further indications on love or heartbreak, it seems rather unlikely.

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<sup>167</sup> Alison Finlay; Anthony Faulkes (2011), Snorri Sturluson: *Heimskringla*, Vol.1, 51.

<sup>168</sup> Aðalbjarnarson (1954), *Heimskringla I*, 89.

<sup>169</sup> Leszek Gardela (2012), “Entangled Worlds. Archaeologies of Ambivalence in the Viking Age”, 125.

<sup>170</sup> Gardela (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 125.

<sup>171</sup> Zoëga (2004), *A Concise Dictionary*, s.v. ber-serkr.

Optional altruistic suicide seems to fit best in this case. However, the concept of the category does not include suicide out of shame. Durkheim mentions the self-killing to escape the stigma of insult.<sup>172</sup> Haki kills himself because of the shame he does not want to live with. Optional altruistic suicide is the closest category to that. Maybe a new category, the ‘shame-based altruistic suicide’ would fit even better.<sup>173</sup>

### 2.2.3. NJÁLL FROM *BRENNU-NJÁLS SAGA*

The next suicide from the sagas that will be presented here is taken from *Brennu Njáls saga*. The suicide that I will examine takes place rather at the end of the saga. It happens in the scene, when Flosi and his crowd set Bergthórshvål on fire. Previous to these events are many accusations, attacks, revenges, misunderstandings and mediations between various characters in the saga. Flosi, holding a grudge against Njáll for having insulted him with a silk cloak at the last Alþing, gathers a big group of men and rides to the homestead of Njáll.

Njáll, together with his family and household, goes inside the house for he believes that they will be safe inside. Even though his sons doubt it, they follow him inside as Skarpheðinn states: “Því at hann er nú feigr. En þó má ek gera þetta til skaps hans at brenna inni með honum, því at ek ekki hræddr við dauða minn.”<sup>174</sup>

Flosi and his men set the building on fire. Njáll comes to the door to ask Flosi if his family and staff is allowed to leave to not be burned inside. The children and the servants are allowed to leave, what they as well do. Flosi then turns to Njáll and offers him to leave the house as well, for he does not deserve to burn inside.<sup>175</sup> But Njáll refuses to leave the building and gives in addition a statement for his refusal to rescue his live: he is an old man now and not able to avenge his sons. Therefore, he prefers to die instead of having to live with the shame: “Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.”<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 181.

<sup>173</sup> It is debateable whether the term should rather be called shame-based egoistic suicide, since the person kills himself for egoistic reasons like not having any reason to live anymore and decides it as well only by himself. Still, this subcategory is closer related to optional altruistic suicide, since the person is not exactly forced by the society to kill himself, but it is favourable to them, serving an altruistic duty. But the line between them is thin.

<sup>174</sup> Sveinsson (1954) *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 326. (I’m not so sure of that, because he is marked for death now. however, I shall gladly do it to please my father and be burned to death inside with him, because I am not afraid to die. See: Carl F. Bayerschmidt, Lee M. Hollander (1955) (transl.), *Njál’s Saga*, 262).

<sup>175</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 330.

<sup>176</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 330. (No, I will not come out, for I am an old man and little fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame. See: Bayerschmidt, Hollander (1955), *Njál’s saga*, 265.)

After that his wife Bergþóra is asked if she wants to leave, but she decides to stay and die with her husband, because she promised that she will share his fate with him when they married.<sup>177</sup> Their grandson Þord Kárasson does not want to leave his grandmother and wishes to stay in the house and die together with them. All three lay down in the bed and Njáll makes the sign of the cross over them “Þá singdu þau sik bæði ok sveininn...”, and one of the servants covers them with a hide.<sup>178</sup> His sons hear about what happened and when the beams start falling from the roof, Skarpheðinn says: “Nú mun faðir minn dauða vera, ok hefir hvárki heyrtil hans styn né hósta.”<sup>179</sup>

Njáll stayed in his house, together with his wife and grandson knowing that he is going to die from the fire. This suicide is very different from the one described before, in which the berserk Haki falls onto his sword. Njáll's suicide was no active self-killing but a conscious, passive self-killing by not doing anything to prevent it. Émile Durkheim defined the term suicide as “resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself”<sup>180</sup> of which the person knows the outcome. The terms “positive” and “negative” have to be understood as rather “pro-active” and “non-preventive” and are not evaluating the deed.

The ways in which the two men end their lives are contrasting. Haki is committing suicide directly and positive: he stops following the king and his men, grabs his sword, turns it upside down and kills himself by falling onto his sword. This is a very active self-killing. Njáll, on the other hand, acts in the opposite manner. His suicide is happening in a passive, indirect and negative act. He knows exactly that he will die. Previous to the burning there are hints that he already knows what is going to happen to him. He does nothing to prevent the events, stays willingly inside the house and lays himself into the bed, together with his wife and grandson. He lets the fire kill him, does not prevent or fight against the upcoming events, even though he is aware of the outcome.

When looking at the special death of Njáll, it is important to include the aspect that he was a converted Christian at the time of his death. Having the attitude of the Christian church towards suicide in mind, the scene, and especially the finding situation of his uncorrupted body after the fire, have to be regarded under a further aspect when dealing with suicide: martyrdom. Hjalti is asked to bring Njáll's body to the church and as he and some company find the body

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<sup>177</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 330.

<sup>178</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 331.

<sup>179</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 331.

<sup>180</sup> See the section on definitions in this thesis.

it is in an unburned state, whereas Bergþóra's body is burned completely.<sup>181</sup> This passage could lead to the interpretation that Njál was dying the death of a martyr, protected by God.

Regarding the motive, the active suicide of Haki is surprisingly similar to the passive suicide from Njáll. He stays inside of his burning house because he perceives himself as too old to avenge his son's deaths. Not avenging his sons would put a great shame on him, since he is their father and it is his duty to take revenge on the killers. The inability due to old age and the danger of living with a shame like this are two facts that cannot be changed. This leaves him with no alternative but to kill himself or rather to let himself be killed. Like Haki, he chooses death over living with shame, putting this case as well in the for this work invented shame-based altruistic suicide category. If Njáll's Christian belief is to be taken into account too, this case could as well include acute altruistic suicide. The third subcategory of altruistic suicides describes a variation where suicide is committed out of the hope and belief to become part of something greater. Even though Njáll's case does not completely fit into this category, his martyr-like death and his preserved body suggests that the author wanted to stress the religious aspect in his death. The fact that he committed suicide, which is regarded as a shame in Christian context, did not change his faith, he believed in God and was therefore protected by the flames, even though he still died. The strong religious notion in this case of suicide should be considered. The reason for his wish to die was his inability to avenge his sons, but he turned towards this fate with a strong faith, knowing his soul will be safe because he commended his soul to God "...ok fálu ǫnd sína guði á hendi..."<sup>182</sup>

His death shows characteristic marks of both "worlds": the strong feeling of vengeance and shame at inability of performing revenge from pre-Christian times and the deep faith in God and the afterlife of the soul from Christian times.

#### 2.2.4. EYVINDR AND GAUTI FROM *VATNSDÆLA SAGA*

The saga was most likely first written down at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland<sup>183</sup> and is a chronicle of a well-descended family over five generations, starting in Norway and continuing in Iceland.

The suicides from Eyvindr and Gauti are similar to Njáll's suicide. The resemblance is however not in the way they commit suicide, but in the motive. Eyvindr and Gauti were very

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<sup>181</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 343.

<sup>182</sup> Sveinsson (1954), *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, 331.

<sup>183</sup> Gwyn Jones (1944), *The Vatnsdaler's saga*, 1.

good friends with Ingimundr, they came together to Iceland from Norway. After a fight between Ingimundr's sons and the troubling Hrolleifr, the latter spears Ingimundr in the 'middle' "á miðjan",<sup>184</sup> meaning into the torso. After having received this fatal injury, Ingimundr drags himself home with the help of one of his servants. He sits in his chair, breaks the shaft off the spear and waits for his sons to come home. They find him dead in the chair. After hearing about their friend's death Eyvindr does something rather unusual in the sagas. Eyvindr "siðan brá hann saxi undan skikkju sinni ok lét fallask á ofan ok dó svá."<sup>185</sup> Gauti hears from the death of Ingimundr and Eyvindr and decides to not want to live anymore: "...ok brá saxi fyrir brjósti sér ok drap sik."<sup>186</sup>

After they hear that their friend is dead Eyvindr and Gauti decide to kill themselves, in a positive, active act. The motive behind their suicide is similar to Njáll's reason. They are not able to avenge a beloved one, in the latter case their friend Ingimundr. He got killed by another man, therefore, it is expected from them to avenge his death by killing the murderer Hrolleifr. However, it can be assumed that Eyvindr and Gauti are of old age when the killing of Ingimundr happens, since they came from Iceland together when they were young. The saga tells of their lives in both places, and their presumed lack of physical strength due to a higher age keeps them from going after Hrolleifr. Not avenging a killing is regarded as shameful and unmanly. This would dishonour them.<sup>187</sup> Their only way out of this situation, from their point of view, is avoiding to live with the shame in avoiding living at all. For them death is preferable, just like it was for Haki and Njáll, putting their suicide in the same category: shame-based altruistic suicide.

The motives for the suicides of both men resemble Njáll's motives. To better understand the deeds of the men, including Haki, a closer look at the society is helpful. Carol J. Clover has discussed the role of sex and gender in Old Norse sagas and societies.<sup>188</sup> She concludes that there was no binary male-female division. But a division between strong or "able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman)"<sup>189</sup> and weak or "a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men."<sup>190</sup> Strong

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<sup>184</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939) (ed.), *Vatnsdæla Saga: Hið íslenska Fornritafélag*, 61.

<sup>185</sup> Sveinsson (1939), *Vatnsdæla Saga*, 63. (Then he drew his sword from under his cloak and fell upon it, and so died. See: Jones (1944), *The Vatnsdaler's saga*, 68.)

<sup>186</sup> Sveinsson (1939), *Vatnsdæla Saga*, 64. (...and he thrust a sword into his breast and slew himself. See: Jones, (1944), *The Vatnsdaler's saga*, 68.)

<sup>187</sup> Kirsi Kanerva (2015), "Having no power to return? Suicide and Posthumous Restlessness in Medieval Iceland", 69, in: *Thanatos*, Vol. 4 1/2015, 57-79.

<sup>188</sup> Carol J. Clover (1993), "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe", 68, in: *Speculum. A Journal of Medieval Studies*, Vol.68, No. 2, 363-37.

<sup>189</sup> Clover (1993), "Regardless of Sex", 380.

<sup>190</sup> Clover (1993), "Regardless of Sex", 380.

and weak were attributed to the masculine and feminine genders. The traits were acquired and assigned to people according to their behaviour. Being feminine was associated with weakness and powerlessness which was the most feared condition of the time. When Njáll, Eyvindr and Gauti are ashamed and scared to live with the burden of not having been able to avenge their sons/friend, a duty that was expected of masculine men, they feared to be put into the weak, feminine and powerless category. The same is true for Haki, who kills himself for having been defeated. Men could in age easily slide into the weak category when getting older, which was connected to humiliation and loss of status. Therefore, death on own terms seemed more favourable to them. Even though her one-sex model is disputed, I think it could help explaining these cases of male suicide. However, the model might not be applicable everywhere.

### 2.2.5. NANNA NEPSDÓTTIR FROM *GYLFAGINNING*

All these examples are about men who committed suicide for different reasons and in different ways. There are as well women who committed suicide in the sagas. One reason for suicide for a woman is discussed by Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson<sup>191</sup> and Judith Jesch.<sup>192</sup> They describe a practice known from parts of India and Bali, but as well from Northern Europe's bronze age: suttee.<sup>193</sup> That practice describes the killing of a wife after the death of her husband. Whether this happens voluntarily or whether the women were forced into suicide or directly killed is not certain since the source situation is difficult.<sup>194</sup> The idea behind it is that the wife follows her deceased husband into the afterlife in order to be with him again.

One example of suttee in the sagas is the death of Nanna, the wife of Baldr. As described in the mythological story *Gylfaginning*, the death of Baldr is a painful loss to all the gods and all the beings in the world. Especially to his wife: “Þá var borit út á skipit lík Baldrs, ok er þat sá kona hans Nanna Nepsdóttir, þá sprakk hon af harmi ok dó; var hon borin á bálit ok slegit í eldi.”<sup>195</sup>

The question that comes up regarding her death, is whether she just dropped dead the moment she saw the body of Baldr on the ship, or whether she killed herself because of her

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<sup>191</sup> Davidson (1968), *Road to Hel*, 51.

<sup>192</sup> Judith Jesch (1991), *Women in the Viking Age*, 27.

<sup>193</sup> Davidson (1968), *Road to Hel*, 51.

<sup>194</sup> Since there probably existed human sacrificing in the Viking Age, the line between a voluntary death and a forced sacrifice is thin. See: Neil Price (2008) “Dying and the Dead: Viking Age mortuary behaviour”, 267, in: Neil Price; Stefan Brink (ed.), *The Viking World*, 257-273.

<sup>195</sup> Lorenz (1984), *Gylfaginning*, 549. (Then was Baldr's body brought onto the ship, and when his wife Nanna Nepsdóttir saw that, broke her heart of grief and she died; she was brought onto the pyre and the fire kindled. Translation by the author.)

grief and the wish to be with him in the afterlife. Alexander Murray describes the expression ‘to die of grief’ as a euphemism used in medieval literature to soften the deliberate suicide of a person.<sup>196</sup> This makes it very difficult to determine exactly if a person in a literary source actually dies from self-killing or not. However, having his words in mind, some passages from the sagas can be read and interpreted differently, especially those in which women and her dead husbands are involved. The examples of the suicides of Óðinn and Nanna have to be handled differently from the other cases, since these suicides are presented in the Old Norse myths. The mythological nature of the two examples separate them from the others by not trying to represent something “real” or which possibly might have happened. They are a different type of story. The topic of the exact role of myths in culture and society is not the topic of this thesis. We can assume that they were not only entertaining, but as well teaching. Moral values, ideological structures, proper behaviour as well as role models were shaped and displayed in these myths, next to fantastic and magical stories. The death of Nanna might have been used to display how a queen or wife should act in this situation, that it was in a way expected from her to follow her husband in death.<sup>197</sup>

When thinking about ‘dying of grief’ mentioned in connection with women and their dead husbands, one other aspect comes to mind: the medical diagnosis ‘broken heart syndrome’ or ‘Tako Tsubo’.<sup>198</sup> This is a known medical condition in which the patient shows similar symptoms to a heart attack. The cause, however, is not a blockage in the blood vessels but change in the heart muscle causing unusual pumping this is most likely by stress-hormones and often affects women.<sup>199</sup>

The suicide of Nanna at the funeral of her husband Baldr is at the first sight an example for obligatory altruistic suicide. Durkheim defines three types of suicides committed by ‘primitive people’, among that the suicide of men of old age and sick, of women at their husband’s death and the suicides of followers and servants at the death of their lord.<sup>200</sup> They all belong to the category of obligatory altruistic suicide, it is expected from them to do that, it is their duty. Still, Nanna is described of dying because of grief, a euphemism to suicide, and not because these are the rules in the society. Nanna might have committed an egoistic suicide, if she really died out of grief, since she does not see any reason to live.

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<sup>196</sup> Murray (1998), *Volume 1*, 35.

<sup>197</sup> See: Jens Peter Schjødt (2011), “The Warrior in Old Norse Religion”, 269-296, in: Gro Steinsland et al., *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faroes*.

<sup>198</sup> Komamura, K., Fukui, M., Iwasaku, T., Hirotsu, S., & Masuyama, T. (2014). “Takotsubo cardiomyopathy: Pathophysiology, diagnosis and treatment”. *World Journal of Cardiology*, 6(7), 602–609.

<http://doi.org/10.4330/wjc.v6.i7.602>

<sup>199</sup> <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/broken-heart-syndrome>

<sup>200</sup> Durkheim (2002), *Suicide*, 177.

When thinking of women sacrificing their lives at the death of their husbands, the connection to Ahmad Ibn Fadlan's account of the Rus at the Wolga and their funeral ceremony is easily made.<sup>201</sup> The account Muslim travelling diplomat describes a slave girl who voluntarily decides to be killed in the practice of ship burial to accompany her master, the deceased, in the next life.<sup>202</sup> This motif of wanting to join the deceased husband or lover in the next life and therefore committing suicide is a common one in Old Norse written sources. For example, in *Völsunga saga* Brynhildr stabs herself with a sword after the murder of Sigurðr in order to be burned with him on the pyre to be with him in the afterlife. "Siðan tók hon eitt sverð ok lagði undir hönd sér ok hneig upp við dýnur . . ." <sup>203</sup> "Ok er bállit var allt loganda, gekk Brynhildr þar á út ok mælti við skemmumeyjar sínar at þær tœki gull þat er hon vildi gefa þeim. Ok eptir þetta deyr Brynhildr ok brann þar með Sigurði, ok lauk svá þeira ævi." <sup>204</sup>

There is a certain gender-related imbalance towards the male side in the presented suicides. The reasons for a higher suicide rate among Viking Age men, at least as it is presented in the sagas, might be due to the fact that the sagas tell more about male suicides than of female. There is no way of knowing if this was reality in pre-Christian Scandinavia. It is at this point very important to remember that the sources that have been dealt with for the last chapters are not historical accounts on events and people but have to be used and understood with the necessary distance. The higher amount of suicide committed by men in the sagas could represent reality, it might just as well only be because the authors found it more interesting to write it like that or did not know of any female suicides.

After having reviewed the suicides in the sagas and additionally putting them into categories, the motives for suicide in the Viking Age become clearer. The given categories and their definitions from Durkheim and the one that was invented not only help to understand why the characters in the sagas committed suicide, but as well display the frequency of deaths for similar reasons. This is not an exhaustive statistical research of all suicides in all Old Norse sagas ever written. Nevertheless, even this small group of more or less different suicides can

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<sup>201</sup> James E. Montgomery (2000), "Ibn Fadlān and the Rūsiyyah", 3, in: *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2000), 1-25.

<sup>202</sup> The usage of this source is debatable and tricky due to the reporter's own bias and the fact that he had to rely on a translator. Still, the description of the scene is unique and worth keeping in mind.

<sup>203</sup> Sigurðr Nordal, G. Turville-Petre (ed.) (1965), *Völsunga Saga. The Saga of the Völsungs*, 59. (Then she took a sword and stabbed herself under her arm. She sank back against the cushions. See: Nordal, Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 60.)

<sup>204</sup> Nordal, Turville-Petre (1965), *Völsunga Saga*, 61. (When the whole pyre was ablaze, Brynhildr walked onto it, telling her attendants to take the gold she wanted to give them. Then Brynhildr dies and was burned there together with Sigurd. See: Nordal, Turville-Petre, *Völsunga saga*, 61.)

assist in understanding. In the cases of the six people<sup>205</sup> just discussed, there are two cases from one person, Óðinn, of which the first one could be categorized as acute altruistic suicide and the second neglected because it is no suicide. There are four shame-based altruistic suicides (Haki, Eyvindr, Gauti and Njáll) which could partly as well be optional altruistic suicide (Haki) and Nanna's obligatory altruistic suicide, or depending on the interpretation, egoistic suicide. Even if some interpretations may vary, it is still quite clear that the main motive for suicide, among men in the sagas, seems to base on shame. This has certainly to do with the mentioned gender categories from Clover, which seem to have been prevalent in the pre-Christian Scandinavian world, degrading a man who misses his duty of avenging down to a powerless and unmanly old woman. Honour, strength and power were desired in this world. This is at least the image created by the authors of the sagas in the Middle Ages. There should be no doubt that many of the situations and scenes of suicides were exaggerated for the literary purpose. The sagas were, at least partially, composed to entertain.<sup>206</sup>

The essence that should be kept in mind here that suicide as a chance to avoid living with the shame of having to admit to not being capable anymore of fulfilling designated deeds was accepted and apparently widespread.<sup>207</sup> This might have occurred more often in the world of men when they became older. The greater shame in this world was to not do something that was expected. A shame which was avoidable by suicide. Suicide functioning as 'a way out'. In the Christian world, it was the greater shame to commit suicide. In both worlds either seems to have been equally strong.

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<sup>205</sup> To be clear: Óðinn, Haki, Njáll, Eyvindr, Gauti and Nanna.

<sup>206</sup> In this context important to mention the rather parodic and silly account of pagan suicide rituals from Gautreks saga. Here the ole family members of a family living remote in the forest jump off a Ætternisstapa (a family cliff) whenever unusual thing occur. See: Guðni Jónsson (1950) *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda. Fjórða Bindi. 5*, Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan. "Því heitir þat Ætternisstapi, at þar með fækkum vér vart ætterni, þegar oss þykkir stór kynsl við bera, ok deyja þr allir várir foreldrar fyrir utan alla sótt ok fara þá til Óðins, ok þurfum vér af engu váru forelli þyngrsl at hafa né þrjózku..." (It's called Family Cliff simply because we use it to cut down the size of our family whenever something extraordinary happens, and in this way our elders are allowed to die straight off without having to suffer any illnesses. And then they can go straight to Odin, while their children are spared all the trouble and expanse of having to take care of them. See: Hermann Pálsson, Paul Edwards (1968), *Gautreks Saga and other medieval tales*, 27-28, New York: University Press.)

<sup>207</sup> One further example for 'a way out' can be found in Egils Saga. After the death of his son he loses all will to life on and wants to end his life, together with his daughter. His reason for a suicide would be the pain of loss and having no more reason to go on living. They do however not go through with it, but instead Egil composes his beautiful poem *Sonatorrek*. See: Sigurður Nordal (1933), *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 244-45. "Vel gerðir þú, dóttir, er þú vill fylgia feðr þínum; mikla ást hefir þú sýnt við mik. Hver ván er, at ek muna lifa vilja við harm þenna?" ("You do well, daughter," said Egil, "when you want to keep your father company. Great love you have shown me. What hope is there that I will want to live after this sorrow?" See: Gwyn Jones (1960), *Egil's Saga*, 203, Syracuse: University Press.

### 2.3. SUICIDE IN THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

To identify suicide in an archaeological context seems to be rather impossible. There is hardly a handwritten suicide-note lying next to the thousand years old body declaring the intentions and reasons.<sup>208</sup> In the archaeological context it is furthermore hard if not impossible to recognize a suicide with only a skeleton as a starting point. Although a skeleton might be able to give indications on age, health status or long-term diseases of the person, it is not possible to see what happened to the soft tissue that once surrounded the bones. Soft tissue damage or great blood loss could easily cause death and, if self-inflicted, indicate a suicide. Even today many suicides are not easily determined due to a lack of witnesses or evidence. As Murray writes in his work “The person who commits it (suicide) usually wishes to hide while he does it.”<sup>209</sup> And those who discover the suicide usually do not wish to make it public, meaning when researching this topic, one tries to look for something that is not there and was intentionally hidden.

But not all suicides were a discrete and private act, as was just shown in the previous section.<sup>210</sup> That the suicides could have been described means that, even if they were only created and did not happen in reality, they were noticed and observed by others. Entering a world now with no written accounts but only pure material remains, without explanations and comments given at hand, suicides becomes very hidden again and presumably undiscoverable. It is not the aim of this section to proof a suicide in archaeological remains. But rather to take a close look at graves from the Viking Age and try to change perspective on the interpretation, opening up to the idea that individual burials might have been of a person who ended her or his life on own terms and wishes. The focus will be put on graves that show any signs of deviation from usual burial behaviour, regarding grave goods, positioning of the body, the presence of stones on or next to the body, or anything else that seems out of the ordinary. Yet, there is nothing like a ‘normal’ burial from the time in Scandinavia. As Leszek Gardęła states, it is particularly difficult to determine a deviance, because there is hardly anything normal to be found.<sup>211</sup> Various regional differences make a categorization hard or impossible and a previous simplification did not do the diversity justice.<sup>212</sup> However, some trends are detectable. Funerals, burials and all rituals surrounding these events are executed for and by the survivors, therefore

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<sup>208</sup> And even if there would have been a note, it would have been probably decayed over the centuries.

<sup>209</sup> Murray (1998), *Vol 1*, 21.

<sup>210</sup> For example: Njál and Nanna as the ones with highly likely audience. The others (Eyvindr, Gauti, Óðinn) probable but not certain.

<sup>211</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 48.

Price (2008), “Dying and the Dead”, 257.

<sup>212</sup> Price (2008), “Dying and the Dead”, 257.

a direct conclusion on the deceased can lead into a wrong direction. This requires caution and care when dealing with the interpretation of causes of death. This will be considered during the next part.

### 2.3.1. THE GERDRUP GRAVE

In 1981, a double burial of a man and a woman dated to around 800 AD was found in Gerdrup near Roskilde in Denmark.<sup>213</sup> The grave contained two well preserved skeletons which were identified as a woman and a man. The male skeleton was around 35-40 years old and had a knife lying on his chest.<sup>214</sup> According to Gardęła<sup>215</sup> his cause of death is not clear, although Christensen<sup>216</sup> indicates the twisted cervical vertebrae is a strong indication that this man might have died from hanging. As can be seen in figure 2 in the appendix, next to his head was a big stone and he was lying in an unusual position with his legs widely spread, whereas his feet seem to have been bound together.<sup>217</sup> Close to the man, the skeleton of a woman was found, approximately of 40 years of age, with an unidentifiable cause of death.<sup>218</sup> Very particular are two large stones that are situated on the woman's chest and on her right leg, measuring 30x45 and 30x55 cm.<sup>219</sup> In the grave were no further grave goods found aside from a spearhead of 40cm lying upside down next to the woman, a knife, a needle case and unburned sheep crania fragments.<sup>220</sup>

The presence of stones in a grave and particularly, in this case, on the body of the woman, is not that usual and can indicate a special meaning of the person or any circumstances regarding the body and the grave. It could for example indicate the cause of death of a person in a grave, since the practice of stoning someone to death is known from the Viking Ages. The sagas tell of stoning to death as a method of killing enemies<sup>221</sup> and Gardęła underlines the possibility that

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<sup>213</sup> Tom Christensen (1981), "Gerdrup graven", 19-28, in: *ROMU Årsskrift fra Roskilde Museum 1981*.

<sup>214</sup> Christensen (1981), "Gerdrup graven", 21.

<sup>215</sup> Gardęła (2012), "Entangled Worlds", 143.

<sup>216</sup> Christensen (1981), "Gerdrup graven", 21.

<sup>217</sup> Gardęła (2012), "Entangled Worlds", 143.

<sup>218</sup> Gardęła (2012), "Entangled Worlds", 145.

<sup>219</sup> Christensen (1981), "Gerdrup graven", 21.

<sup>220</sup> Gardęła (2012), "Entangled Worlds", 145.

<sup>221</sup> See: *Vǫlsunga saga* chapter 44: King Iormunrek orders to stone Guðrún's sons to death, Grimstad, 235. See Einar Ól.Sveinsson (1935) (ed.), *Eyrbyggja saga: Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, chapter 20: Katla gets stoned to death, 54. One further interesting case involving stones in a grave is from Iceland: the grave at Vaði í Skriðdal in Eastern Iceland. The upper body of the deceased male was covered with a stone slab measuring 68cm x 50cm x 9cm. This stone was not from the area the grave was found but brought to the sight from a valley further away. The whole burial raises questions on the purpose of the stone as well as on the deceased himself. See: Guðrún M.

presumed performers of (evil) magic were as well killed in this way.<sup>222</sup> According to Folke Ström stoning was used as a punishment for thieves, murderers and practitioners of evil sorcery leading him to the conclusion that this custom is based on old practices.<sup>223</sup>

The appearance of stones on a grave can as well mean that the stones were thought as a protection of the body from robbers or animals<sup>224</sup> or of the living from the deceased.<sup>225</sup> Especially criminals or any other kind of evil-doers, practitioners of magic and those of “evil character”<sup>226</sup> were killed by stoning. The stones functioned as a marker for others to identify where an evil person was buried, but as well to keep them in their graves and prevent them from rising as ghosts.<sup>227</sup> One simple function of these stones, when they were visible at the surface, could have been a grave mark<sup>228</sup> similar to grave stones from today, or geological specifics of the area.<sup>229</sup>

The stones in the Gerdrup-grave do not seem to have been there due to geological reasons or by any other accident, they appear placed onto her body with determination. Furthermore, the grave was placed in a rather marginal position on a ridge near an old fjord. These peculiarities plus the twisted vertebrae of the man make this burial special and in a sense deviant from others. The aspect of hanging is interesting in different ways: it was used as a punishment for theft, but as well murder or treason.<sup>230</sup> Furthermore, hanging has a less secular character as well as it was done additionally to sacrifice to Óðinn and stands therefore in close connection to him.<sup>231</sup> The reasons for the combined unusualness of the Gerdrup grave, regarding burials of intact bodies without stones and with grave goods near the farm as more usual, can only be guessed. Due to the stones on the female skeleton in combination with the spearhead that was pointing downwards, she has been interpreted by Christensen and Gardęła as a possible sorceress.<sup>232</sup> In general spears were rare in female graves. Therefore, the spearhead next to her could be possible magic equipment.<sup>233</sup> The stones could be placed on top of her body to keep her in the grave and to protect the living from her. This interpretation is one possibility. She

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Kristinsdóttir (1956), “Kuml og beinafundur á Austurlandi”, 89-97, in: *Árbók Hins íslenska fornleifafélags*, 84. árg, 1987.

<sup>222</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 141.

<sup>223</sup> Folke Ström (1942), *On the sacral Origin of the Germanic Death Penalties*, 104.

<sup>224</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 173.

<sup>225</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 108.

<sup>226</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 108.

<sup>227</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 108.

<sup>228</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 174.

<sup>229</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 170.

<sup>230</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 121.

<sup>231</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 134.

<sup>232</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 147.

<sup>233</sup> Gardęła (2012), “Entangled Worlds”, 148.

might as well have been an unfriendly or evil character, or a foreigner from a different region. The definite thoughts behind this action remain unclear, but the result is the same: two big stones were placed (thrown) on her chest and her right leg. Judging from written sources place stones on the dead body mostly happened to people that were somehow feared.<sup>234</sup>

The man in the grave might have died from hanging because of his twisted cervical vertebrae. This could have happened when he was hanged as a punishment for crimes committed previously. It could as well have happened while he hung himself, committing a suicide. The feet of the man were probably tied together when he was buried, which is interesting, because it might say something about the way he was seen when he was buried. One interpretation of the tied feet is that they were bound together to keep him from walking out of his grave. This could mean that he was an “evil” character, or it might have been connected to his suicide. People maybe preferred extra protection due to his unusual death. The action does not necessarily say anything about the conception of suicide. His feet could as well have been tied together because he was a criminal who was sentenced to death by hanging, which would of course completely exclude suicide.

The burial together with the stoned woman might therefore have happened because they were both outside of the “usual” society. She because she was a sorceress, foreigner or evil, he because he committed suicide and the people of the community did not want these two lying too close to the farm, wherefore they were buried in a remote area. The whole burial could shed a different light on the handling of suicides in the pre-Christian Scandinavian society, at least on the handling of this certain community in Gerdrup. The examined sagas give the impression, that suicide was nothing shameful and somehow a good way out of a bad life or situation. The interpretation of the Gerdrup grave suggests a rather a less “positive” attitude towards suicide. The chances are small that the dead body was indeed a suicide. However, should the latter be true, the Gerdrup grave illustrates unease or an excluding attitude towards it. The burial together with the woman who is weighted in her grave put him into the same feared category.

Another interpretation of this particular grave, mentioned by Christensen,<sup>235</sup> is that the man was a sacrifice for the woman. He underlines that the fact that the woman is having a weapon as a gift in her possession is particular and could assign her a special male status. And just as men were accompanied by their women or female slaves, this man could have been the equivalent in this case.

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<sup>234</sup> The reasons why they were feared can be diverse and cannot be reconstructed in detail. The mentioned passages in the sagas can help to give an idea.

<sup>235</sup> Christensen (1981), “Gerdrup graven”, 26.

The location of the grave is of specific interest as well. Being placed on a beach near an old part of the fjord<sup>236</sup> it reminds of the grave location from Haki's burial mound in *Heimskringla*. As mentioned earlier, this area between water and land seems to have been of certain significance. Being in neither state, beaches and shores often play a role in the execution and burial of criminals or sorcerers in the sagas as well as in the early laws.<sup>237</sup> Haki's mound and the Gerdrup grave share this special remote location. According to Ström, the custom of stoning/killing criminals and afterwards burying them on the shore is mentioned in the *Dala law* and *Västmannalaw*, indicating the significance of this act.<sup>238</sup>

There are of course other possible interpretations of this particular grave. To the ones already mentioned in the text a few might be interesting to add. The burial with its alternative components might have not been unusual at all in this particular community, as well as a specific fashion at the time. The two might have as well wished to be buried that way. They might not have died from a violent death at all, but of natural causes that are not traceable now. Specific religious beliefs might have played a role. Furthermore, a burial is mostly not a display of the beliefs of the buried person or persons but display the thoughts of the burying community. There are countless possible interpretations on how the scenario ended the way it did. The point is not to find and identify the one and only correct answer, since there might not be one. The point here is to take the possibility of a suicide into consideration when examining human remains, just as any other possible cause and manner of death.

#### 2.4. CONCLUSION ON SUICIDE

The previous sections on suicide in the sagas and Old Norse myths, and the example of a possible suicide in the archaeological context must be treated as unexhaustive examples of the act of self-killing. What we can conclude from those examples, is a different attitude towards suicide than in Christian Europe at the time. Based on this and combined with the strong sense of honour and the different binary weak/strong model present in the society, a suicide was probably seen as an alternative to living on. The self-determined death was preferred over living in shame.

One highlighted aspect in the research is the case of male suicide following the wish to join other warriors in Valhøll. Similarly, women practiced suttee to be reunited with the

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<sup>236</sup> Gardela (2012), "Entangled Worlds", 142.

<sup>237</sup> In *Eyrbyggja saga* (20) Katla and her son Oddr are killed at the shore; In the same saga (63) Þóroddr gets burned at the shore after haunting and killing people as a *draugr*, a restless corpse. See Sveinsson (b), 54, 170.

<sup>238</sup> Ström (1942), *Death Penalties*, 105-6.

deceased husband. We can conclude that the main reason for male (and female) suicide, was that the shame of not fulfilling an expected duty weighing so heavy that death appeared more welcome than life. In some cases, the focus on the afterlife could have been the triggering point. Although it does seem biased by the Christian authors, with Christianity being a religion which focuses strongly on the afterlife.

### CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION OF THE THESIS

The initial research question of this thesis was whether the written and archaeological sources give a clear concept of homicide and suicide and whether this concept differentiates with the Christian concepts of homicide and suicide in Central Europe of the time. IN order to answer this question, the two kinds of violent death, homicide and suicide, were examined in different cases with the help of written and in archaeological sources.

According to my analysis, there was definitely a different perception as well a different concept of homicides and suicides presented in the written sources, the sagas as well as the law-codes: Homicide was not identified and determined as previous to the deed as is done today where planning and premeditation are an essential part of the definition, and suicide was less stigmatized due to a different religious belief-system and the high value of honour and duties.

We cannot identify exactly how these two manners of violent deaths were perceived in the Viking Age, due to a lack of written sources, such as letters or diaries from lay-people, of the time. However, based on the material discussed above, it can be concluded that the topic of death and dying was treated as a less dreadful and fearful aspect of life. Of course, in the time between 800 and 1050 AD death was a daily companion and people were more used to the omnipresent danger. Furthermore, regarding the various regional differences in rituals and customs in general, one has to bear in mind that this topic is very subjective, and personal opinions varied for sure greatly.

However, suicides and as well as homicides should be regarded as possibilities when researching human remains. One of this thesis' aims is to encourage looking at the archaeological material with a different perspective and to take suicide as a manner of death into consideration in research. Furthermore, to examine the written sources with an adjusted attention to the different forms of violent deaths. It is necessary to use all available source material to gain the best possible insight and to better understand the way people in the Viking Age were perceiving homicide, the dead body, the murderer, and how they dealt with people who committed suicide and the respect for the dead.





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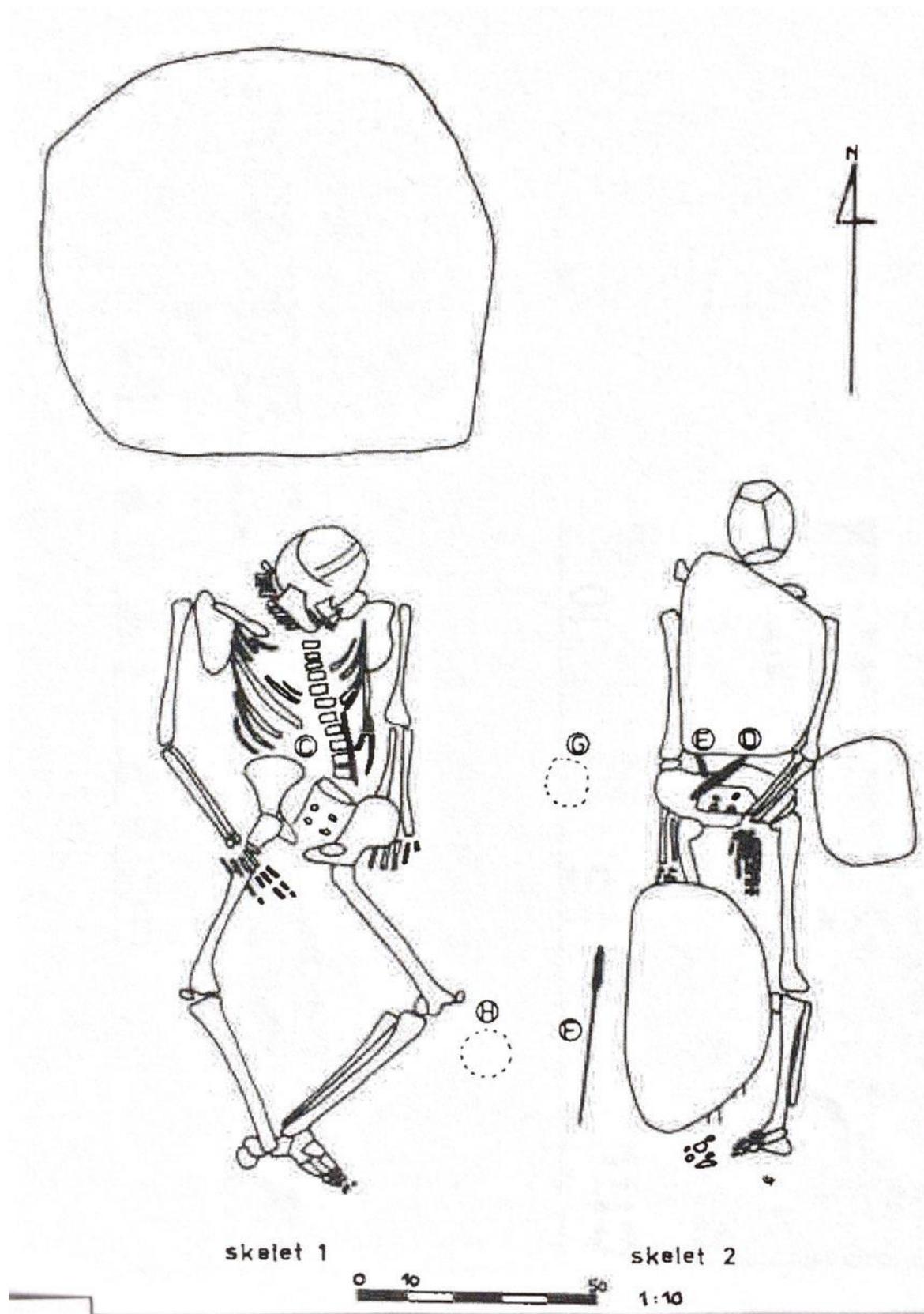
APPENDIX

Figure 1: The remains of the Gokstad-Chieftain as displayed in the Vikingskipshuset in Oslo.



Picture taken by the author.

Figure 2: Plan drawing from the Gerdrup-grave.



C: iron knife; D: iron knife; E: needle case; F: spearhead; G-H: animal bones<sup>239</sup>

<sup>239</sup> Picture taken from: Christensen (1981), Gerdrup-graven, 23.