

Beasts from the East and Magical Monarchs:
The connection between Sweden, Swedes, and the Supernatural
in the Saga corpus

Jonathan Scott Sapoznikoff Foltz



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Institutt for lingvitiske og nordiske studier

Universitet i Oslo

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Abstract:

The saga corpus contains numerous accounts of supernatural humans, be they monstrous beings like *berserkir* and *draugr*, or wielding inhuman powers and communing directly with the supernatural as an innate part of their character. An oft-overlooked aspect of the saga narratives is the tendency for these characters to be explicitly Swedish, or to have some other direct connection to Sweden as a locale. Indeed, Sweden itself is often portrayed as an inherently supernatural locale, as well as a place of immense temporal power being the domain of strong kings and cult leaders. This paper examines this trend throughout the saga genres, focusing upon well-known sources where this trend is visible, and critically analyzes literary and sociohistorical evidence in order to determine just why this trend exists, and how it changes between the sagas and the genres.

Foreword:

This master's thesis is the culmination of two years of study, and a lifetime of fascination, with the great works of literature and the living history of a time and place I once thought I would only be able to reach in my imagination. I have had the remarkable privilege to be part of this program which has given me the opportunity to not only travel to the birthplace of the sagas and to the places where centuries ago the mythology was made, but also to meet and interact with a singular group of peers with whom I've been able to share this journey. I have also had the great benefit of knowing and interacting with the established scholars of this field, who have been nothing but a source of inspiration and wisdom for me as I have gone forward in this program and in my own, independent scholarship. However, there are those who deserve my special thanks for their help and support.

First, I must thank my advisor, Ole-Albert Rønning, for being the necessary critical eye and whose own experience helped guide me in the proper direction, and for having the patience to bear with my long periods of non-communication and constant delays. I also owe much to the staff at both Háskoli Íslands and Universitet i Oslo for their continuous support and patience with me as I worked through the process of being split between three countries and two universities. The deepest gratitude I owe is to my friends and family, because without them I would never have been able to do any of this. I owe my father, Scott, for being a never-ending well of support for me and for being the man whose own love of learning set me on this path over twenty years ago. I owe my mother, Susan, for never doubting when I did and for being a lifeline at any hour, of any day. I owe my sister, Sarah, for own brilliance which I have always been inspired by, and whose own struggles and triumphs have buoyed me. I owe my brother, Logan, my Stepmother, Margaret, my grandparents to for whom my love and gratitude can never be properly put into words. To my friends, for keeping my head above water and for inspiring me to go beyond what I thought was possible for myself. Finally, I owe my gratitude to the line of scholars whose work has led me to this point, and whose ranks I one day hope to be counted among.

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Introduction:

In the Saga corpus, across the various genres, the supernatural looms large even in narratives meant to reflect the mundane world of living memory rather than the heroic legends of a mythic past handed down over centuries as oral tradition. Stories of berserks and other monstrous beings of human origin exist as key narrative points, often serving as either a great challenge to the protagonist, or sometimes even being the protagonist themselves. Likewise, even those who are not monstrous in their form or behavior carry a link to the supernatural as an inextricable part of their character, be it as a devotee of the gods who carries their favor through great sacrifice or possessing inhuman traits which make them greater champions than their peers. The idea of mankind being so innately tied to the supernatural that men may become monsters or otherwise behave in such a monstrous and unnatural way, or have some innate aspect of the supernatural to them, is an element of saga storytelling which is often taken for granted with the majority of scholarly criticism given to the analysis of the supernatural as a whole rather than as part of a greater element of the character which is only evident when taken in its entirety. Thus, beyond the analysis of the supernatural as a concept, there are several elements in the portrayal of these monsters and other supernatural characters which are worth bearing out. Specifically, why certain characters more than others are either explicitly labeled as supernatural or monstrous and are noted directly by the narrative while other characters avoid being negatively portrayed despite their natures and actions. In the same vein, it is also worthwhile to ask why these characters who are explicitly dubbed as monstrous or supernatural by the narrative are also often explicitly named as Swedish or have some direct tie to Sweden as a location. Across the sagas there is a distinct tendency to portray Sweden and the Swedes as somehow being more closely tied to the supernatural than their Norwegian or Icelandic cousins, be it as protagonists who directly engage with the pre-Christian gods and wield inhuman power due to their connection with the unseen world, or as monstrous antagonists whose villainy is opposed by the saga's protagonist.

There are several possible reasons for the linking of Swedes and Sweden to the supernatural or for Swedes to become monstrous beings upon their contact with a greater supernatural force. It could be due to Sweden's late conversion relative to the rest of Scandinavia, which saw their entrance to Christendom and took on a Christian context almost a century before Sweden did. Likewise, there is the history of heavy cult activity which in Sweden

before and during the Viking Age, which when combined with the existence of monumental sites of temporal and cult authority in what is now central Sweden could have led to the formation of a living mythology surrounding both the Swedes as a people and Sweden as a locale.

However, not all supernatural Swedes are portrayed as villainous in the sagas, with many being protagonists, particularly in *fornaldarsögur*, and possessing connotations of nobility and strong temporal authority rather than connotations of baseness and villainy as is often portrayed in the *íslendingasögur*. This difference in portrayal despite the continued connection of Sweden to the supernatural, and even the monstrous, has interesting implications for both the literary tradition of the sagas, as well as the extant oral tradition from which the sagas were derived. Thus, this paper will focus upon the portrayal of supernatural and monstrous humans in the sagas, the tendency for these characters to be explicitly labeled as Swedes, and how this tendency and portrayal shifts between the different genres of the sagas. This paper will also discuss in turn the connotations of the supernatural as portrayed in the sagas regarding West Norse characters and how the sagas differentiate between West and East Norse characters and how the portrayal of these characters differ and what the implications of these differences are.

While the analysis of the supernatural elements within the narratives of the sagas is well-tread ground in the academic tradition surrounding saga studies, very little attention has been paid to the differences in the sagas surrounding the Swedes as characters and Sweden as a location. While the sagas are obviously not historic documents they are invaluable for cultural analysis of the Norse world in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, thus the analysis of the difference in portrayal between the West and East Norse as pertaining to the supernatural can possibly provide further insight into how the West Norse authors of the sagas perceived their world and their relation to their East Norse sociocultural cousins. It is also hoped that this inquiry likewise piques interest in the further exploration of accounts detailing Viking and pre-Viking Age Sweden in the hopes of perhaps corroborating material evidence which might otherwise lack a broader cultural context outside of the material context in which they are recovered.

The methodology of this paper is critical examination of the saga texts, specifically looking at both the language and narrative tropes used to describe these supernatural characters while also taking into consideration the historic context of the sagas, particularly the religious culture of the Norse world in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries and the sociopolitical

spheres which existed prior in the Viking Age which still had influence in the Christianized Norse world. Textually, this paper will focus on the critical examination of the characters which are explicitly described as Swedish and those characters who are explicitly West Norse as per the narrative's description. While the differentiation between the Norse peoples does also occasionally seep into the portrayal of the East Norse as a whole, including Danes, for the purposes of this paper the only comparisons made will be between the West Norse Norwegians and Icelanders and those characters who are explicitly identified as Swedish or who have explicit direct ties to Sweden, such as immediate ancestry, mentioned in the narrative.

By taking a comparative analysis of those characters who are explicitly dubbed Swedes and those who are explicitly West Norse it will demonstrate the deliberate choices made within the narrative and characterization to portray these characters in certain attitudes and contexts which tie directly into their ethnic identity and status as a supernatural being or not. Likewise, for the textual analysis this paper will compare text from multiple manuscripts of the same saga, where applicable, to determine if the particular wording of key segments changes in ways which would significantly alter the analysis of the text's meaning in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the historic text in context rather than a more modernized, diplomatic edition. Alongside critical literary theory this paper will include some limited critical material study which has pertinence to the literature being examined, particularly examining some Viking and pre-Viking Age archaeology in central Sweden which could be tied to the accounts of Sweden in the sagas as a central administrative and cult site in Scandinavia. Through critical examination of the text while also considering the broader sociohistorical context a greater understanding of what the narratives imply through their framing the supernatural and Swedish identity in such a way, and how understanding this portrayal might lead to further lines of inquiry in historic and social studies.

Chapter 1: Context of the *Berserker*, *Draugr*, and other Supernatural Humans

To understand the role of these supernatural human characters in the saga it is important to establish them within their contexts, both in terms of their roles within the narratives they are presented in as well as the various literary formulas and other metatextual features, such as external poetic verse inserted into the sagas by the authors, attached to them. These formulas, and especially the poetic verse, are the remains of the pre-literary oral tradition of the Norse

which remained after the translation of the sagas from orality to literature. Both features are crucial to understanding these supernatural characters both from a narrative standpoint as well as a metaconceptual standpoint, vis a vis what they represent in the story and what they likely represented to the greater culture within their context. To this end this paper will be focusing primarily on examples which can be roughly divided into three categories: *berserkir*, *draugr*, and other overtly supernatural human characters. While this last category might seem overly-broad, it is the best compromise in terms of retaining focus on the ethnic element of the portrayal of the supernatural versus breaking down every possible category of supernatural human character in the sagas. Most of these loosely-defined characters are those that have a central role in cultic rites, and who engage directly with the gods like Heiðrekr in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.

Beginning with the *berserkir*, supernaturally-empowered warriors who allegedly drew their inhuman might and unnatural powers, alongside their uncontrollable rage, directly from the favor of the gods, which allowed them to perform superhuman feats of strength and durability in battle albeit at the cost of becoming helplessly weak and vulnerable once they calmed down from their frenzy. *Berserkir* are some of the most famous, or rather infamous, characters from the sagas whose legacy still lingers in the modern world, albeit in a vastly different form than their portrayal within the sagas. Interestingly, there seems to be a shift in the portrayal of berserks from the *fornaldarsögur* to the *íslendingasögur*, as will be commented on further in the paper, possibly giving indications to the shift in sociohistorical context from the material which *fornaldarsögur* are derived as opposed to the later Icelandic tales.

The *Berserkir* are often described as being linked to the god Óðinn, typically in his being a patron and whose favor is a source of power for the warriors who in turn dedicate their lives and kills in combat as sacrifice to him. There is explicit linking of the *berserkir* to Óðinn in several sagas, including *Ynglingasaga*, *Hrolfs saga kraka*, and *Eigils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*.¹ This paper will address the *berserkir* in *Ynglinga saga* later, but in both *Eigils saga einhenda* and *Hrolfs saga kraka* the *berserkir* are portrayed as both supernatural men as well as professional warriors in a kingly retinue.² The connection of *berserkir* to

¹ Jens Peter Schjødt, "The Notion of *Berserkir* and the Relation between Óðinn and Animal Warriors" in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature, Sagas and the British Isles*, edited by John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick, vol. 2, 886-892, (Durham: Centre of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 886, 890.

² Schjødt, "The Notion," 891.

positions of power is interesting in the context of the growing cult of Óðinn and its connection to the expansion of centralized power in Scandinavia, particularly in Denmark and Southern Sweden (specifically those parts which were historically part of the Danish-Swedish borderland such as Scania) where the cult of Óðinn was seemingly strongest during the pre-Viking Age and early Viking Age as well as serving as the setting of several *fornaldarsögur* including *Hrolfs saga kraka*.³ Another interesting part of the lore of the *berserkir* is their connection to sacrificial rites, to Óðinn in particular, usually by hanging or impalement with a spear. This is explicit in several sagas, in particular *Eigils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* where one of the saga's protagonists, Ásmundr narrowly avoids being sacrificed by a pair of berserks to Óðinn and earns his epithet by killing them both after escaping.⁴ This connection to sacrifice is also present in *Ynglinga saga* where the euhemerized Óðinn would hurl a spear over opposing armies to mark them as sacrifice before their deaths at the hands of his berserk warriors, and upon his death it is mentioned that he began a tradition of marking oneself with a spear on one's deathbed to ensure one's place among Óðinn's host in death.⁵ Likewise the supernatural rage of the *berserkir* is tied to the mythology of Óðinn, whose very name can be translated as "the frenzied" or "the furious" and had intense emotion, such as inhuman rage, and madness as one of his multiple aspects.⁶ By being so closely linked to the mythology surrounding one of the most central figures in the pre-Christian mythology of the Norse people, *berserkir* had inherent ties to the unseen power aspect of the supernatural, being able to claim strength and prestige from the mythology surrounding the god in order to build up their own legend in mundane world.⁷ Thus, it is important to keep this context in mind when examining accounts of *berserkir* where the supernatural elements of their character are not as overt as other examples.

Anatoly Liberman in his seminal research of the *berserkir* divides the mentions of *berserkir* between the two typical presentations within the sagas, one being the symbol of royal power and authority as the most valuable men in a king's retinue, and the other as the base

³ Joshua Rood, "Ascending the Steps to Hliðskjálf: The Cult of Óðinn in Early Scandinavian Aristocracy," 54-58, 59-62.; Schjødt, "The Notion," 887-888.

⁴ Schjødt, "The Notion" 889-890.

⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, edited by Jón Helgason, Trygve Knudsen, Peter Skautrup, and Elias Wessén, (Copenhagen: Vald. Pedersens Bogtrykkeri, 1952), 12-13.

⁶ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, translated and edited by Frances L. Tschan, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 207.; Anatoly Liberman, "Berserks in History and Legend," *Russian History* 32, no. 4/5 (January, 2005), 401-411, 407.

⁷ Schjødt, "The Notion," 890-891.; Rood, "Ascending," 51-52.

marauder with a trumped-up reputation.⁸ Both, he argues, have strongly formulaic aspects to their telling in the sagas, particularly the *Íslendingasögur* with their almost always travelling in groups of twelve, appearing around Yuletide, attempting to ravage a farm where the Icelandic protagonist is staying, and finally being slain by the Icelander who in turn receives great fame and rewards for their deed.⁹ While this bears out upon reading several sagas, including *Grettis saga*, *Egils saga*, etc., there are several elements to these formulas which demand further analysis, particularly in the *berserkir* typically appearing around Yuletide. Within both the pre-Christian and Christian contexts Yuletide was considered a time of increased supernatural activity, and oftentimes danger. This is seen in such examples as Glámr's death to a violent haunt on Yuletide in *Grettis saga* as well as the gang of *berserkir* who Grettir slays earlier in the saga.¹⁰ The Yule season's original context is inextricably linked to the cult of Óðinn, one his many epithets being *Jólfaðr*, so the tendency for *berserkir* to be linked to the Yule season in the sagas is very likely a holdover from the pre-Christian context of Yule as a time of import for the followers of Óðinn, including *berserkir*.¹¹ This in turn lends an inherent supernatural bend to the accounts of *berserkir* that do not necessarily delve deeply into the supernatural, such as the account in *Grettis saga* which is largely a comedic, even slapstick, episode in the greater saga narrative. Another element of the *berserkir* formula Liberman analyzes is their tendency to be infamous duelists who accumulate massive amounts of wealth by seizing the property of those they kill in *holmgang*, which in turn enriches the Icelandic hero of the saga when they slay the berserk.¹² This is exemplified by the episodes in *Grettis saga* and *Egils saga* where the heroes of each narrative outfight a berserk marauder, or in Grettir's case a band of twelve, at the behest of a victimized farmer who handsomely rewards the hero for their deed alongside the wealth taken off the *berserkir*, with the whole episode merely serving to highlight the protagonist's heroism and build their reputation in-story. Liberman, in his skeptical analysis of the historicity of the *berserkir* as mythic warriors, points out that berserks were historically outlawed, such as in 1012 by Jarl Eiríkr Hákonarson, which Liberman takes as evidence that the historic *berserkir* were nothing more than common criminals who deliberately cultivated a ferocious, cultic image

⁸ Liberman, "Berserks," 402, 408.

⁹ Liberman, "Berserks," 402.

¹⁰ Liberman, "Berserks," 402-403, 411.

¹¹ Liberman, "Berserks," 411.

¹² Liberman, "Berserks," 402, 405, 408-409.

around themselves in order to aid their banditry, and that this mythic façade was then erroneously correlated with other, unrelated myths involving Óðinn by Snorri Sturluson.¹³ While there is certainly merit in considering the historic *berserkir*, inasmuch they existed, to have been criminal bands as a way of explaining the trend in the Icelandic family sagas to portray the berserks as debased bandits rather than honored warriors and veteran retainers to aristocracy, it seems overly-reductive to consider that to be all they were. Liberman also points out that in peacetime those young men who were primarily warriors by trade and had little experience with agrarian work would turn to banditry when they were unable to join Viking bands or engage in war, which could go to explain the dual image of berserks as both veteran warriors of high prestige and common criminals.¹⁴ However, Liberman ignores the ethnic implications of the *berserkir* as ‘others’ in his analysis, as in *Egils saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* the *berserkir* are explicitly Swedish, and in *Grettis saga* the leaders of the berserk band were two brothers from Hålogaland in the extreme far north of Norway which, while technically making them West Norse like their victims, carried similar connotations to those coming from Sweden or another non-West Norse locale due to the high concentration of Sami aboriginals as well as sitting on the very periphery of Norwegian society.¹⁵

Outside of the sagas, most information about the mythology surrounding the *berserkir* comes from skaldic poetry, with the skalds usually referencing the *berserkir* by their place and actions in the armies of Norse aristocracy. Berserks also feature in Eddic poetry, with at least one reference made to “*bruðir berserkir*” in *Hárbarðsljóð* as one of Þórr’s boasts, and also within *Haraldskvæði* in their context as warriors under Haraldr *inn hárfagri*.¹⁶ The inclusion of *berserkir* in skaldic poetry is especially telling as it indicates that the Norse considered them a very real occurrence even with the supernatural connotations of their character, or at the very least a concept which applied to the real world outside fantastic stories, and the reference to *berserkir* in Eddic verse also serves to reinforce the supernatural aspect of the *berserkir* even if it may not reflect the historic truth of what these warriors actually were.

¹³ Liberman, “Berserks,” 408-409.

¹⁴ Liberman, “Berserks,” 409.

¹⁵ Kevin J. Wanner, “Off-Center: Considering Directional Valences in Norse Cosmography,” *Valences* 84, no. 1 (Jan 2009), 36-72, 49-51.

¹⁶ Liberman, “Berserks,” 401-402.; Schjødt, 887.

Beyond the *berserkir*, *draugr*, alternatively called *aptrgangr*, are another form of the violent supernatural common to the sagas, particularly in the *Íslendingasögur*, which plague mundane society with their hauntings.¹⁷ *Draugr* are restless, malicious undead which haunt the areas they frequented in life as well as the vicinity around their resting place, and like accounts of *berserkir* the accounts of *draugr* tend to follow certain formulaic patterns following their appearance in the narrative. The first element of the *draugr* is the nature of the person's death, either being killed by another *draugr* or some other violent supernatural entity, such as Glámr in *Grettis saga*, or otherwise dying with some intense negative emotion or deeply-held conflict yet unresolved like Þorolfur in *Eyrbyggja saga*.¹⁸ After their death it often follows that the *draugr* to be takes on an unnatural form with the skin becoming horrifically livid as well as their corpse becoming impossibly heavy. It is usually at this point that a burial cairn is hastily erected by those around and shortly after the *draugr* begins haunting the region. It is then that the *draugr* is either vanquished by the saga's protagonist, or is removed as a threat by being physically unearthed and reburied in a remote location.¹⁹ The haunting of the *draugr* is typically marked by the targeting of livestock and shepherds above all else, along with physical assaults on the buildings of farmsteads including "riding" the buildings (*reið husum*) to cave in the roofs.²⁰ The fact that *draugr* prefer to target farmers and livestock render them a tremendous menace not only physically, but also economically and culturally as they disrupt the livelihoods of their targets beyond simply threatening their lives outright, thus making them especially pernicious in the context of the agrarian Icelandic society. Also, the *draugr* can be seen as being both a supernatural threat as well as a manifestation of the natural disasters endemic to Iceland with the toxic influence of the *draugr* in their environment mirroring volcanic gas flows which to an Iron Age society would indeed seem to be the inexplicable sickening and death of any living thing in a certain area and the violent night attacks on farmsteads ringing close to a sudden, violent storm causing severe material damage when it is unexpected. Especially in the context of *Íslendingasögur* this blending of the violent yet mundane natural world with the violent supernatural seems to be a perfectly logical extrapolation by the Icelanders who began the Norse

¹⁷ Cristina Vişovan, "The *Draugr* as seen as 'The Other' in the Icelandic Family Sagas," *Studia Ubb Philologia* 1, (2014) 123-136, 124-125.

¹⁸ Vişovan, "The *Draugr*," 132.

¹⁹ Vişovan, "The *Draugr*," 132.

²⁰ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, edited by Guðni Jónsson, (Reykjavik, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 113.

oral tradition in Iceland, and later formed the crux of the Norse literary tradition through the adaption of the earlier oral material, thus when the human element is more pronounced like it is in *Grettis saga* with Glámr, it could be taken as a deliberate act by the authors in terms to altering the oral-derived literary formula to suit the author's intent.

Having established the context for the *berserkir* and *draugr*, it is worthwhile to try to establish some context for those supernatural humans which do not fit into either category but instead derive their status as an explicitly-supernatural entities from some other source, such as those who directly interact with the pre-Christian deities or those who wield some supernatural power as an innate ability. The primary examples used in this paper are Hervör and Heiðrekr from *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, and the euhemerized *Æsir*, *Vanir*, and their *Ynglingar* descendants in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* as they all possess some supernatural aspect which is vital to their character in the narrative, but are not made out to be anything other than human like the *berserkir* and *draugr* are. These figures are worth examining because even though they do not fit the monstrous characterization of the *berserkir* or *draugr*, their status as the supernatural often puts them in the position of an 'other' within the context of the narrative, and for those who are not remarked on it is likewise worth examining because the omission of attention is just as telling from a narrative standpoint as the extra attention given to others.

Chapter 2: Sweden as a Hub of Power in the Sagas

Sweden holds a special place in the *fornaldarsögur* as a place of immense political and spiritual power. It is often that the heroes of the *fornaldarsögur* trace their lineage through mythical Swedish nobility, and base their realms out of what is now central and southern Sweden. In the *fornaldarsögur*, Sweden was not only many mythical kings but also the seat of power for the euhemerized *Æsir* in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga*, with the narrative taking pains to trace the new myth of the *Æsir* from Asia to Sweden as part of Snorri Sturluson's reconciliation of the pagan with the Christian. The linking of Sweden to the supernatural is interesting in the context of the sagas, given that the sagas were overwhelmingly produced by West Norse scholars in a West Norse context, thus the heavy focus on eastern locales and persons, especially with a focus on the centralization of power in those areas, could indicate Sweden having this status as a place of power in the pre-saga oral tradition. By contrast, Sweden typically features very little in *íslendingasögur* and *konungasögur*, again due to the West-Norse

contexts of the sagas' narratives and production. The most Sweden is usually mentioned is its relation to the kings of Norway, be it through war and raiding or through peace arrangements, usually through political marriage.

In the previously mentioned *Ynglingasaga*, the euhemerized *Æsir* and *Vanir* eventually settle in Sweden after fleeing their homelands in Asia and trekking through what is now Russia and Germany, with Óðinn eventually making his seat at Fornsigstuna and establishing a great temple there to hold sacrifices.²¹ Likewise, Freyr is said in the saga to make his domain at Gamla Uppsala and the great temple which stood there during the Viking Age is attributed to him as well as the massive pre-Viking Age burial mounds at Uppsala which stood in proximity to the temple complex, thus linking the historic site of temporal and spiritual power in Viking Age Sweden directly to these euhemerized gods.²² It is interesting too that Snorri described the eastern wilderness the *Æsir* and *Vanir* hailed from and travelled through as “*svíðioð in mikla*,” which is described in fantastic terms by Snorri “*þar eru riser ok þar eru dvergar...ok drekar furðuliga stórir*,” implicitly tying Sweden in general to the concept of the mythic east which pervades the sagas through its nomenclatural connection to the areas of Russia, Siberia, and Central Asia unknown to the Norse.²³ Past the nomenclatural connection, Sweden being the east-most of the Scandinavian realms put it both figuratively and literally on the edge of the Norse world, save for what outposts still existed in the Slavic lands in what is now Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, while being the closest to the mythical east. While the mentioned creatures of this mythic east cleave closer to the fantastic than the supernatural, a distinction evident in the narrative's language about the subject, it is still worth considering the spatial context, particularly in the context of Snorri's synthesizing the Pre-Christian Norse cosmography along with the Latin Christian cosmography.²⁴ Snorri's account of the Asian *Æsir* and *Vanir* as the hyper-advanced civilizing colonists of the primitive Swedes in the North, whom they conquer easily with their supernatural powers and establish their cults as god-kings combines the notion of the east as both a place of salvation and wonder as per the Christian cosmography, as well as a place of immense supernatural peril and inhuman things, as per the Norse cosmography.²⁵ This

²¹ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 9.

²² Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 13-14.

²³ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 5.

²⁴ Wanner, “Off-Center,” 39, 65-66.

²⁵ Wanner, “Off-Center,” 67-69.

synthesis is another example of the reconciliation between the Christian and non-Christian Snorri attempts throughout *Ynglinga saga*, while still maintaining the typical Norse tropes of the east, and Sweden in particular, as being a place of immense authority, supernatural power, and more than common danger.

Beyond being the seat of the euhemerized gods, *Ynglinga saga* portrays ancient Sweden as being a major site of cult and temporal power linked to the *Ynglingar* monarchs. However, beyond their descent from the euhemerized gods, the supernatural elements of the *Ynglingar* monarchs typically factor in only during the end of their reign, be it through their strange disappearance or, more commonly, through being sacrificed by their own people to stave off famine or other disaster.²⁶ However, it is mentioned in the narrative that these *Ynglingar* monarchs did have some degree of direct supernatural power over their realm, being able to ensure peace and prosperity (“*ár ok fríður*”) in Sweden through their sacrifices, or sometimes by being sacrificed themselves.²⁷

This portrayal of Sweden as being the seat of the *Æsir* may have larger implications in their euhemerization within Snorri’s narrative. While the site itself was long destroyed by the thirteenth century, knowledge of the great temple at Uppsala obviously remained among the Christian Norse, if only through secondhand accounts, and the pre-Viking Age barrows likewise stood as a testament to Uppsala being a place of significance over the course of centuries. Thus, Snorri’s linking the euhemerized *Æsir* to an extant place of immense cult and lay power in Scandinavia is a natural extrapolation in the context of the twelfth century while also conveniently explaining away the pre-Christian tradition in favor of the Christian worldview. While Snorri obviously took his own liberties in euhemerizing the pre-Christian mythology of the Norse pantheon, it still stands that rather than merely inventing the entire mythology he was instead adapting and expanding upon a known mythology that was still in the cultural memory of the Norse people. Thus, Snorri’s use of Sweden as the seat of the *Æsir* was either adapted from the extant material Snorri had knowledge of, or otherwise was deliberately chosen by Snorri as being the ideal seat of power for the euhemerized pantheon following their journey to the west from Asia. In either circumstance the conclusion is that Sweden had strong connotations of both

²⁶ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 15-16, 18.

²⁷ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 14-15.

temporal and cult power to the later medieval West Norse, which could serve as a strong basis of why so many powerful supernatural saga characters from the West Norse sagas have their origins in this mythic conception of the Swedes and Sweden.

Beyond *Ynglinga saga*, there is a trend in the *fornaldarsögur* to have their main narrative settings in Sweden and have Swedish characters at the forefront of the narrative as both protagonists and antagonists. Likewise, it is common for the Swedish protagonists of the *fornaldarsögur* to either have immediate supernatural lineage or otherwise have some strong tie to the supernatural vis a vis their extreme devotion to the pre-Christian deities and interacting directly with said deities. This can either take the form of being *berserkir* or otherwise having overt supernatural powers, or alternatively by taking a central role in cult activity either as a leader or as an integral follower. An example of this is the family line of Arngrimr as portrayed in *Hervarars saga ok Heiðreks*, with the patriarch of the family line first establishing himself in southern Sweden, his sons all being berserks, and his great-grandson eventually becoming a great ruler and cult leader in a nebulous, fantastical realm which forms the mythic Sweden and the historic eastern Europe.

Chapter 3: The Portrayal of *Berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur*, analysis of West and East Norse characters in context of berserk or other antisocial behavior.

The *íslendingasögur* often portray the supernatural as a fact of life accepted by Icelanders and Icelandic society as depicted in the saga narratives. The way these supernatural characters and events are portrayed seems to depend on how it affects the society at large, with the benign supernatural portrayed favorably even within a Christian context, such as the happy spirits of the dead which dwell in *Helgafell* in *Eyrbyggjasaga*, and the disruptive supernatural being always negatively portrayed even within an ostensibly non-Christian context, such as ravaging berserks. This dichotomy of the supernatural could reflect the agrarian Icelandic values of the Viking Age and Medieval Period, where long periods of calm and stability led to mass prosperity for the island and inversely where any major disruption, such as the major feuding of the thirteenth century between the Sturlungar and other clans, led to widespread economic and civic ruin. Another aspect of the *íslendingasögur* is the shift in context from the pre-Christian to the Christian, sometimes within a single saga. This shift is highlighted in the way that many *íslendingasögur* take an ambivalent, if not outright mocking, tone toward the pre-Christian cults and the supernatural tied to them. An example is in the portrayal of berserks, rather than being

powerful champions who are given their tremendous powers by Óðinn and are rightfully feared, they are instead often portrayed as debased bandits who are swiftly dispatched by the braver, more resourceful West Norse protagonists, and often then in a fashion which renders the episode a comedy rather than a pitched drama.

Egils Saga provides an interesting perspective on berserks, monstrous behavior, and other supernatural people in the context of the *íslendingasögur*. Several characters within the saga, notably the titular protagonist and his kin, have allegedly supernatural origins and display behavior typical of berserks without being explicitly dubbed as berserks, most notably the West Norse characters such as Egil and his kin. Conversely, several characters are dubbed as berserk or are otherwise of monstrous or supernatural origin, and either display no behavior indicating such or are ultimately much lesser in their behavior than the protagonists despite their monstrous reputation and treatment by the narrative. This treatment as striking, as the saga also engages in typical tropes of portraying magic users, people with supernatural traits, and berserks as inherently villainous due to their supernatural natures. While it is difficult to ascribe traditional tropes of heroism to the sagas without becoming revisionist, it is clear that Egil Skallagrímsson and his forebears are treated with more respect within the narrative than their antagonists, and display qualities which were considered positive in their context, particularly Egil's cleverness and ability as a poet, which contrasts with the same character's vicious, animalistic, or antisocial behavior throughout the narrative. When discussing favorable treatment within the sagas, it is necessary to look at subtle points in the way the narrative is worded. Sometimes it is explicit, with the narrative outright dubbing something or someone monstrous or noting how their actions brought them shame and infamy, and sometimes it is less obvious such as using the reactions of characters to events to give emotional weight for or against the subject. An example being Egil's rivalry with King Eiríkr of Norway where the narrative never outright condemns Eiríkr's actions against Egil and instead lets Eiríkr's pettiness and poor behavior speak for themselves in Egil's defense.²⁸ Thus, by taking a dialectic approach toward the analysis of the characterization in the saga's narrative, evidence of distinctly pro-west Norse bias bears out.

²⁸ *Egil's saga*, translated by Bernard Scudder, edited by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2004), 111-113, 132-133.; *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, edited by Guðni Jónsson, (Reykjavík, Bókaverzlun Sigurðar Kristjánssonar, 1945).; Note, for the basic citations of the saga narrative I refer to the English, Penguin Classics edition. For the Old Icelandic I cite the 1945 edition edited by Guðni Jónsson, however several multi-page lacunas in the edition which includes material in the Penguin edition led me to cite the latter over the former.

Of all the berserks and other supernatural people that feature in *Egils Saga Skallagrimssonar*, only one is explicitly labeled as a Swede. This particular berserk, Ljot *inn bleiki*, fits the typical Icelandic portrayal of the berserk as being little more than a particularly fierce bandit and murderer who gains tremendous wealth and property through killing landowners in duels. Indeed, he does not possess the supernatural resistances to fire and blades ascribed to *berserkir*, dying when Egil cuts off his leg during their duel. Further, the narrative makes it clear throughout the episode that Egil is clearly superior to Ljot in terms of fighting ability, treating the whole incident as an amusing distraction rather than a pitched battle.²⁹ However, despite lacking the supernatural aspects attributed to berserks, Ljot does enter a “berserk fury” and Egil says that Ljot does engage in some supernatural context in his verse about him stating:

“*Esa friðgeiri færi, forum holms á vit sörvar, skulum banna mjök manni mey, þrlygi at heyja við Þanns bítr ok blótar bönd elhvötuð Göndlar, alfeigum skýtr ægir augum, skjöld at baugi.*”³⁰

possibly referring to the connection between berserks and Óðinn and other supernatural forces. It is interesting that the verse uses the verb “*blótar*” meaning both to worship, and to sacrifice, explicitly in the name of the pre-Christian Norse gods. This could tie Ljot’s killing men in duels to the accounts of berserks dedicating their kills in battle to Óðinn as described by *Ynglingasaga*, *Egils saga einhenda*, and other mythic accounts of the *berserkir*, and is an explicit reference to the mythology surrounding *berserkir* as supernatural men inherently tied to the gods.

It is possible to argue, however, that Ljot’s Swedish identity deals less with his status as a berserk but instead sets up Egil’s later legal troubles with the king of Norway, as it is stated in the narrative that while he inherited all Ljot’s accumulated wealth and property by killing him in a duel, the king had equal claim due to Ljot being an heirless foreigner in Norway.³¹ This could be supported by the fact that outside of Egil’s verse about him and his status as a berserk Ljot does not show any explicitly supernatural abilities nor does he conform to many other formulas

²⁹ *Egil’s saga*, 137-138.

³⁰ *Egil’s Saga*, 139.

³¹ *Egil’s Saga*, 141, 147.

surrounding berserker in the sagas such as appearing at Yule or travelling with eleven other *berserker*. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, however, does correlate Ljot's Swedish identity in the story as being similar to other monstrous beings of Swedish origin in the sagas, such as Glámr in *Grettis saga*, citing other instances of Sweden being an origin for troublemakers and monsters.³² With these coincidences along with the context of *Egils Saga*, Ljot's identity as a Swede is an obvious example of literary othering, so that while he is not as overtly-monstrous as other examples of *berserker*, or even some of the West-Norse protagonists, he is still the troublemaking foreigner figure who while formidable is no match for the distinctly West-Norse protagonist and serves mainly as a tool to portray Egil favorably. This would explain why Ljot is given such an unfavorable treatment both within the narrative by the other characters and by the narrative itself. However, this does not change the fact that Ljot as the most prominent Swedish character in *Egils saga* is given such an unfavorable treatment as compared to the West Norse characters, indicating a distinct bias in the narrative against the east Norse as opposed to the west. Likewise, while the narrative does not bear out his having supernatural powers, the verse Egil speaks about Ljot and his engaging in *blót* should not be ignored in the context of both Ljot's status as a berserk and his characterization as a pagan Swede in an Icelandic family saga.

Having examined the sole example of the villainous, supernatural, pagan Swede in *Egils saga* it is worthwhile to critically examine those supernatural, and arguably monstrous, West Norse characters who appear within the same narrative to have a better comparative framework for how the narrative treats the supernatural and the monstrous when it comes from a more localized context in terms of being among the West Norse. Among the supernatural characters in *Egils Saga*, Egil's patrilineal heritage deserves focus due to its singular role in shaping the characters and their actions, as well as being a family of overtly-supernatural West Norsemen in an Icelandic family saga which receives consistently positive treatment by the narrative. The first ancestor of Egil given major focus in the narrative is his grandfather, Kveldulf Bjalfason, who earned his epithet due to his exceedingly bad temper come nightfall, and his alleged ability to shapeshift into a wolf or send out his spirit in the form of a wolf as a slept.³³ In the one battle described in the narrative in which Kveldulf takes part, both he and Skallagrim are described as

³² Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, "Notes," in *Egil's Saga*, 206-212, (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2004), 211.

³³ *Egil's Saga*, 3.

raging and fighting like wild animals, killing fifty men between them.³⁴ Lycanthropy is a common trope in the sagas, but not often in conjunction with the protagonists of the *Íslendingasögur*, instead being more common among the protagonists of *fornaldarsögur* such as Borvard Bjarki in *Hrolfs saga kraka*.³⁵ These traits, along with Kveldulf's famous ugliness and bad temper, lend credence to his antagonists in the narrative that he has patrilineal descent from a troll.³⁶ This focus on patrilineal versus matrilineal descent comes up often in the saga, with Skallagrim and Þorolf Kveldulfsson having a similar dichotomy with the huge, hideous, disliked, and bad-tempered Skallagrim being more akin to his trollish father's family where the calm, handsome, and popular Þorolf is explicitly stated to take after his mother's family.³⁷ The focus on non-human, supernatural descent coming from the father's line is interesting, as in the sagas the most common supernatural other take the form of women, either as witches or "troll-wives," rather than it being men.³⁸ However, it is also worth mentioning that Skallagrim and Þorolf's maternal grandfather, Kari av Berle, is said to be a berserk, but no more information on his berserk exploits is mentioned in the narrative.³⁹ Kveldulf is the only one of Egil's direct kin who is described as being like a berserk, with his behavior in battle and subsequent exhaustion and death being explained this way, and even then it is addressed in a roundabout way rather than being directly labeled like Ljot.⁴⁰

Skallagrim, like his father, also displays disturbing behavior in the saga, particularly in his later life. A foremost example is his murder of one of his son's friends and a servant in a fit of rage during what was nominally a friendly game.⁴¹ During this fit he only stops after tiring himself running down and killing his servant woman, who interceded to save young Egil.⁴² This sudden, inexplicable rage accompanied by his ability to kill someone in a single blow greatly recalls the exploits of berserks, yet Skallagrim is never labeled as a berserk by the narrative despite both his behavior and his supernatural heritage. It is also worth noting that the narrative explicitly states that it was around sundown when Skallagrim became enraged during the game

³⁴ *Egil's Saga*, 46-47.

³⁵ Schjødt, "The Notion," 888-890.

³⁶ *Egil's Saga*, 3.

³⁷ *Egil's Saga*, 4.

³⁸ Liberman, "Berserks," 401-402.

³⁹ *Egil's Saga*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Egil's Saga*, 48.

⁴¹ *Egil's Saga*, 68-69.

⁴² *Egil's Saga*, 68-69.

and committed the murders, likely harkening back to Kveldulf's own strange behavior come nightfall and reinforcing the family's inhuman aspect. Like his father before him, the narrative does not directly criticize Skallagrim's actions or behavior, with the closest element of condemnation being the estrangement of father and son following this episode and the continued ill-relation between Egil and his father by the time of Skallagrim's death.⁴³ When Skallagrim finally dies later in the saga, his death is treated with a final hint of supernatural with those close to him becoming highly fearful that he will return as a *draugr*. This is reinforced by the uncanny way his corpse is found, sitting at the edge of his bed and staring out over the room while totally upright, much like how Þorolf's corpse is discovered in *Eyrbyggja saga*.⁴⁴ Given Skallagrim's nature in life, combined with the ill feelings between him and his kin by the time of his death, it is evident that this segment of the narrative is meant to recall the mythology surrounding *draugr* as a source of suspense until Egil finally lays his father to rest without further incident.

This favorable treatment within the saga continues with Egil, as there are several instances where he displays animalistic or otherwise antisocial behavior which is not commented on by the saga's narrative. A noteworthy example is his duel with Atli over his wife's inheritance, in which both duelists display less-than-ideal behavior as per the Norse heroic ideal. Atli uses magic to blunt Egil's sword and thus initially gain the upper hand in the duel, to which Egil retaliates by tackling Atli to the ground and savagely biting his throat out.⁴⁵ Neither Atli nor Egil's actions are criticized in the narrative, with those who witnessed the duel seemingly treating it like a regular occurrence despite both the supernatural display from Atli, and Egil's animalistic behavior. Atli's using magic to blunt Egil's sword is interesting in the context of the scene, as it is almost as if the two duelists are sharing a berserk nature divided between them, with Atli having the supernatural power to be immune to blades where Egil takes on the animalistic aspect of the berserk. The closest to condemnation for Egil the saga comes to is his sad end from old age, with the narrative heavily contrasting his growing decrepitude against the powerful, dynamic man he was in his youth.⁴⁶ However, beyond merely being a sobering reminder of the ravages of old age which served as the cost of a long and successful life in the

⁴³ *Egil's Saga*, 120-121.

⁴⁴ *Egil's Saga*, 120-121.; *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 67-69.

⁴⁵ *Egil's Saga*, 143-144.

⁴⁶ *Egil's Saga*, 201-205.

Viking Age, Egil's growing lethargy and weakness could serve as a bookend to his life as a berserk in all but name. Earlier in the saga it is directly mentioned within the narrative that those who go berserk are drained of their power afterward, as happened fatally with Kveldulf.⁴⁷ Egil and his grandfather share much in common narratively in their final moments, so it is not impossible that there is meant to be some implication of post-berserk weakness in Egil's geriatric condition. This is similar to other sagas' circular narrative, with the protagonists or their descendants having experiences which mirror those of their earlier exploits or those of their ancestors, such as the descendants of Heiðrekr in *Hervarar saga* returning to Sweden to become rulers there after their forebear was made to flee, or Grettir's avenging by his half-brother long after his death mirroring one of Grettir's notable killings earlier in the story.⁴⁸

The narrative's treatment of Egil, his kin, and other West Norse characters, is interesting in that despite engaging in witchcraft and antisocial or berserk behavior they are never labeled as monsters, witches, or berserks unlike Ljot who is explicitly labeled as a berserk and treated as villain by the narrative and whose villainy is explicitly commented on by other characters. It is worth questioning why the West-Norse characters are given such preferential treatment by the narrative despite their behavior both in terms of scope as well as degree as compared to the East-Norse characters. Several studies on literary othering in the sagas have pointed to several trends, examining Norse concepts of ethnicity, identity, and society. Sirpa Aalto indicates that much literary othering in the sagas is based upon religion rather than concepts of race, as a modern audience would understand race, as forming an 'other,' with the conflicts between Norse and non-Norse having overtones of Christians conflicting with non-Christians due to the context of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and the rise of Christianity in the Norse world.⁴⁹ However, in the context of *Egils saga* trying to determine how the author determined who the narrative treats as an other based solely upon religion is problematic due to the non-othered West-Norse being pagan by majority until the very end of the saga, including Kveldulf, Skallagrim, and Egil. Egil especially is worth mentioning in this regard as he addresses the Norse gods in several of his

⁴⁷ *Egil's Saga*, 48.

⁴⁸ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, edited by G. Turville-Petre, (Kendal: Titus Wilson and Son, LTD., 1956), 69-71.; *Grettis saga*, 124-137, 271-274.

⁴⁹ Sirpa Aalto, "Categorizing *Otherness* in *Heimskringla*," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature, Sagas and the British Isles*, edited by John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick, vol 1, 15-22 (Durham: Centre of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 16-17.

verses and is only interred in a Christian context long after his death, having never received baptism in life nor made any indication of desiring conversion.⁵⁰ Thus, his pagan beliefs do not seem to factor into the narrative's continued positive treatment of his character, in contrast to Ljot who is likewise implicitly pagan, given his status as a berserk and the references to *blót* made about him, and is a villain. However, in the context of the world during the saga's composition the question of religion has potential due to Sweden's late conversion relative to the rest of Scandinavia as well as Sweden's history as a hub of pagan activity during the Viking Age and earlier could be a factor in the portrayal of Swedes as being somehow more pagan than their West-Norse neighbors. With this in mind, Ljot could be a stand-in for the idea of the Swedes as violent pagans which may have existed in the time of the saga's composition. Given the similar characterization of Ljot and the character of Glámr in *Grettis saga* this interpretation of Swedes being violent pagans, especially when introduced to a West Norse context, seems likely. This paper will refer to Glámr and the importance of his characterization in a later section.

However, for the sake of argument it is worth pointing out that another reason for the positive portrayal of the protagonists despite their behavior is their described industriousness and other positive traits are meant to outweigh their negative behavior, rather than the ethno-religious interpretation of Swedes being considered violent pagans. For example, Kveldulf, despite his terrifying reputation, is portrayed in the narrative as having an abundance of caution and wisdom, as well as favoring peace and industriousness, being a highly-successful farmer in Norway.⁵¹ His cautious nature in old age is best seen in his mistrusting King Haraldr *inn Harfagri*, seemingly aware of the king's capricious nature and lack of loyalty to his followers and his advising his son, Þorolf, to not trust Haraldr and instead stay on their estate.⁵² Skallagrim, too, is described as tremendously hardworking, first supporting his father on the farm after Þorolf leaves to serve as King Harald's retainer, and later becoming both a successful farmer and prolific blacksmith in Iceland.⁵³ Egil, while not as prolific a farmer or craftsman as his father or grandfather, still gains his wealth through means which were considered acceptable in the context of Norse society, reserving his Viking raids and other violence for targets outside of Scandinavia or for those who wronged him and thus not falling into villainy despite his

⁵⁰ *Egil's Saga*, 99, 113, 117, 128-132, 171-176, 203-204.

⁵¹ *Egil's Saga*, 3.

⁵² *Egil's Saga*, 9-10.

⁵³ *Egil's Saga*, 51-52, 53-54.

violence.⁵⁴ Likewise, Egil's status as a poet of some renown gives him yet another positive, one can argue civilizing, factor in his favor despite his not being a professional skald by trade. Ljot, by contrast, is explicitly just a criminal who gained his wealth through unacceptable means, indiscriminately targeting farmers and taking their land and wealth in unfair duels. The positive portrayal of Viking protagonists who restrict their violence against those targets seen as legitimate, such as foreigners, and likewise hold productive work in peacetime against the negative portrayal of bandits who only earn their wealth by plundering their neighbors is common in the sagas, reflecting a distinction made by the Norse people both during the Viking Age as well as during the twelfth and fourteenth centuries when the sagas were composed. This dichotomy between the hardworking, industrious protagonists who create their own wealth or take it through legitimate means, and the plundering antagonists who gain their status solely through illegitimate means could explain why Egil and his kin are considered worthier by the narrative, with their positive traits meant to outweigh the negative, rather than their being worthier just by nature of their being West Norse.

Beyond Egil's saga, one of the more famous instances of berserk Swedish villains in the Icelandic family saga corpus is in *Eyrbyggja Saga*, where a pair of Swedish berserk brothers, Halli and Leiknir, come to Iceland under the word of Vermundr, a local landowner. The berserks were gifts from Jarl Hákon Sigurðarson in Norway, who himself had received them from King Eiríkr *inn sigrsæli* of Sweden.⁵⁵ The berserks are portrayed as troublesome from the start, acting with impudence and arrogance toward the Icelanders. Vermundr eventually tires of their behavior and gives them to his brother, Styr, who likewise finds them troublesome.⁵⁶ Halli instigates between himself and his masters, by demanding them to set up a marriage between him and a powerful Icelandic woman. These *berserkir* are eventually dealt with by trickery devised by the saga's main protagonist, Snorri *goði*, by having Styr bait them into intense labor to expend their berserk strength and then ambushing them outside of a specially-prepared sauna, killing them both while they were seemingly not immune to weapons.⁵⁷ The portrayal of the Swedish berserks takes on an interestingly humorous tone despite the threat they pose, their deaths in

⁵⁴ Egil's Saga, 78-82, 115-119.

⁵⁵ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, edited by Lee M. Hollander, translated by Paul Schach, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 46-47.

⁵⁶ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 47-48.

⁵⁷ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 53-55.

particular with Halli slipping on a raw oxhide placed by Styr and Leiknir being unceremoniously stabbed as he tries to get out of the sauna's trapdoor.⁵⁸ Kári Gíslason writes that the Swedish berserks serve as a perfect foil to the Icelandic protagonists of the saga. Their Swedish background immediately sets them apart due to their different cultural background than the West Norse Icelanders, and conveniently establishes why they would have no relation to any person of note in Iceland. Likewise, their starting from within the court of Hákon Jarl as his veteran retainers, and thus serving as symbols of royal authority and massive warfare between rival states, both of which were alien to the anti-monarchical and agrarian Icelandic culture.⁵⁹ Finally, their status as violent supernatural beings renders them threatening to the Icelanders who, while tolerant of the supernatural, were keen to take action against supernatural entities and occurrences which threatened their lives and livelihoods.⁶⁰ It is interesting, though, that despite the comedic aspect of the Swedish berserk brothers, the narrative still maintains the common tropes of the *berserkir*. They are explicitly part of a royal retinue, in this case being formerly the retainers of the king of Sweden before entering the retinue of Jarl Hákon in Norway, they make strong demands of those they encounter, and they likewise do seem to have some supernatural protections as *berserkir* as Snorri *goði*'s plot banked on them expending their powers doing heavy labor in a lava field prior to their ambushing in the sauna. It is also interesting that the saga mentions they are explicitly Swedish despite being from the Norwegian court, having originally been King Eiríkr *inn sigrsæli*'s men before having their loyalty gifted to Jarl Hákon. This roundabout way for them to get to Iceland via Norway stands out as there would seem to be no reason for their being Swedish rather than native Norwegians serving their direct lord. It is possible that this plot point is a result of a notion that Swedes are more prone to being *berserkir*, given the seeming trope that Swedes are violent pagans as compared to the West Norse in the context on the *íslendingasögur*.

As a final example of *berserkir* in the *íslendingasögur* corpus the episode from *Grettis saga* where the titular hero slays a berserk warband deserves mention, as it seemingly synthesizes the oldest formulas of the *berserkir* such as them travelling in packs of twelve and

⁵⁸ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 55-56.

⁵⁹ Kári Gíslason, "The Fantastic in the Family Sagas: Implications for Saga Authorship," in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles*, edited by John McKinnell, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick, vol 1, 486-494, (Durham: Centre of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), 489.

⁶⁰ Kári, "The Fantastic," 490.

having more power at Yule, along with the formulas common to the *Íslendingasögur* corpus of them being debased bandits killed in a humorous, almost slapstick way. The episode begins as is typical for the formula surrounding *berserkir*, with a band of twelve men attacking a farmstead at Yuletide and demanding the women of the estate as tribute.⁶¹ However, there is an interesting twist at the very start in that the leaders of the berserk band, the brothers Þórir *þomb* and Qgmundr *illi*, had personal grievance against the head of the farm as he had played a decisive role in their outlawing as *berserkir*, giving an uncommonly personal twist to the episode whereas most examples had the raids by *berserkir* as random violence.⁶² Following this the tone of the episode quickly turns from dramatic to comedic with Grettir's roguish behavior, suggesting he would allow the *berserkir* to do as they pleased as part of his trickery, combining with the increasing hysteria of the farm women contrasting with the very real threat of the *berserkir*. Even once the battle between Grettir and the bandits commences the tone remains comedic, almost slapstick, as Grettir fights a pitched battle with the now-drunken *berserkir* who having been tricked by Grettir into surrendering their weapons fight with oars and planks against the Icelander while the farmhands who had been sent as backup for the champion desert him and return to the farm while boasting of their false bravery.⁶³ There are, however, some interesting nuances despite the overall sardonic tone of the episode. Primarily the identity of the leaders of the *berserkir*, Þórir and Qgmundr, who are explicitly described as Norwegians hailing from Hålogaland, and thus are examples of West Norse *berserkir*. However, as mentioned before the historic Hålogaland of the Viking Age and medieval period had a higher concentration of Sami people than Norse, and the cultural directional valence the Norse gave to the far north was one of malignancy.⁶⁴ Thus, the brothers can be taken as others in the West Norse context just as much as the examples of Swedish *berserkir* and monsters, since they did not come from the areas of Norway or Iceland which were considered part of the civilized world.

⁶¹ *Grettis saga*, 63.

⁶² *Grettis saga*, 61-62.

⁶³ *Grettis saga*, 67-71.

⁶⁴ Wanner, "Off-Center," 49-51.

Chapter 4: The *berserkir* in the *fornaldarsögur*, connections to Sweden and pre-Christian myth

Having examined the accounts of *berserkir* and berserk-like behavior across several of the Icelandic sagas, it is worth comparing the accounts of the same in the context of the *fornaldarsögur*. The *fornaldarsögur* tend to be more explicit in linking the berserks to the supernatural, fitting the mythic nature of the sagas and their basis in an older oral tradition than the orality which forms the basis of *Íslendingasögur*. One of the most prominent elements of the supernatural which form an innate part of the *berserkir* in the *fornaldarsögur* is their status as the favored warriors of Óðinn, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Snorri Sturluson made use of this mythology surrounding the *berserkir* in his narrative for *Ynglinga saga* where, even within the euhemerized narrative of Óðinn being a powerful sorcerer from Asia rather than a god, the berserks are explicitly cited as his elite supernatural warriors with the narrative stating:

*Óðinn kunnir svá gera, at í orrostu urðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir, en vápn þeira bitu eigi heldir en vendir. En hans men fóru bryniulausir ok váru galnir sem hundar eða vargar, bitu í skiöldu sína, váru sterkir sem birnir eða griðungar; þeir drápu mannfólkit, en hvárki eldr né iárn orti á þá; þat er kallaðr berserksgangr.*⁶⁵

The mentioning of berserks in the *fornaldarsögur* also tend to be more heroic than their depictions in the *Íslendingasögur*, with several protagonists either exhibiting berserk behavior or otherwise being explicitly descended from berserks, likewise *berserkir* are portrayed in the *fornaldarsögur* as warriors of great renown rather than the simple bandits they are portrayed as in the *Íslendingasögur*. However, this is not a hard and fast rule as there are many berserks, including those in a protagonist role, who are reviled within the narrative due to their behavior and are treated as monstrous due to their natures. In the same vein, it is common in *fornaldarsögur* for protagonists to be explicitly Swedish in origin or otherwise perform many of their actions in Sweden, and then particularly in the Uppland region where the historic cult and temporal centers of power existed.⁶⁶

In *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* the family line the narrative focuses upon are all deeply steeped in the supernatural, starting first with the twelve sons of Arngrimr who are all explicitly

⁶⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 9-10.

⁶⁶ Rood, "Ascending," 93-97, 131-132.

berserkir hailing from what is now south-central Sweden.⁶⁷ These twelve brothers become highly infamous, and eventually come to the court of King Ingjald of Sweden in order to demand that Ingjald's daughter, Ingibjorg, be married to Hjörvard, the second son of Arngrimr. Interestingly, during this segment the sons of Arngrimr receive something of a villainous portrayal despite being the nominal protagonists with their arrival at Ingjald's court and their demands for the hand of Ingibjorg mirroring the actions of villainous berserks in other sagas, in particular with Ingibjorg's trepidation at being married to Hjörvard due to the "evil" ("illar") tales of the berserk's exploits and instead preferring Hjálmar, one of her father's champions.⁶⁸ This prompts Hjörvard to challenge Hjálmar to *holmgang* for Ingibjorg's hand, further mirroring the actions of villainous berserks in other sagas, and it is during this duel that Hjörvard and his brothers are slain by the legendary Norwegian adventurer Örvar-Oddr, who had come to assist Hjálmar, on the Danish island of Samsey. The location of the duel itself holds significance as it is Samsey where Óðinn learned the practice of *seiðr* per the mythology surrounding the god, intimately linking the island to both the cult and mythology of the god as well as to the greater concept of the supernatural.⁶⁹ The verse included during this duel on Samsey, along with the later verse delivered by Hervör and her dead father, are agreed by scholars to be the oldest elements of the saga, being directly lifted from the oral tradition from which the extant saga is derived. The first segments of poetry, delivered from the perspective of Hjálmar and Oddr reference their *berserkir* foes as "*tírarlausir*", glossing as "inglorious" rather than "lacking renown" given the infamy of the *berserkir* brothers, further cementing the sons of Arngrimr as villainous in the greater mythological arc surrounding them, Örvar-Oddr, and Hjálmar.⁷⁰ Interestingly, the narrative explicitly details that the brothers expend their berserk strength killing Oddr and Hjálmar's followers before engaging the two in the duel, thus rendering them vulnerable to the weapons of the two champions.⁷¹ This ties into other accounts of *berserkir* either being baited or otherwise expending their power before engaging the saga's protagonist, such as in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Ultimately all twelve brothers die to Hjálmar and Oddr, albeit at the cost of the former's life due to wounds inflicted by the cursed sword, *Tyrfing*. Interestingly, Oddr

⁶⁷ *Hervarar saga*, 1-2.

⁶⁸ *Hervarar saga*, 2-3

⁶⁹ This is referenced in *Lokasenna* stanza 24 where one of Loki's attacks on Óðinn is stating that he learned *seiðr* on Samsey, "*Enn þik síða kóðu sámseyio í...*" and that it is unseemly (*argr*) for a man to have done so.

⁷⁰ *Hervarar saga*, 4-7.

⁷¹ *Hervarar saga*, 4-5.

is made out as the greater champion of the duel on Samsey, dueling and killing eleven of the twelve brothers while Hjálmar engaged solely with Angantýr.⁷² While the narrative of the duel on Samsey is drawn from a greater oral tradition, it is believed by scholars that the first written versions of *Hervavrar saga* were composed by West Norse writers.⁷³ Thus, the heroic portrayal of the Norwegian Örvar-Oddr against the villainous Swedish *berserkir*, and his outperforming his likewise Swedish ally, Hjálmar, is worth considering when analyzing the narrative's portrayal of the characters with particular consideration for potential authorial bias within the text.

Even in death Angantýr and his brothers remain tied to the supernatural with all twelve dead berserks becoming infamously restless spirits which haunt their shared barrow on Samsey, and it is here Hervör journeys to reclaim the *dvergjar*-forged sword, *Tyrfing*, as her birthright from her dead father. However, it is not clear whether the dead men's status as berserks in life was meant to be part of their continued lingering as spirits after death, being tied toward Óðinn who held the dead and death in battle within his dominion as per mythology it is worthwhile to consider that the berserks' restlessness could be part of that influence. Likewise, their being buried on Samsey, a location so heavily steeped in mythological and supernatural underpinnings, likely also factors into the deceased *berserkir* being so restless in death and lingering on as an infamous supernatural hazard around their grave. It is here that the narrative includes the second part of the older "Samsey poetry," *Hervararkviða*, where Hervör invokes the restless spirits of Angantýr and his brothers before demanding the sword *Tyrfing* as her birthright, not heeding her father's warning that *Tyrfing*'s cursed nature would eventually bring ruin to her family. Interestingly, in the verse Hervör refers to the dead berserks as "*megir meingjarnir*" further cementing the twelve brothers as malign in their reputation and intended reception due to their status as *berserkir*.⁷⁴ However, the spirit of Angantýr likewise dubs Hervör "*fullfeikn kona*" as she refuses to heed his warnings, perhaps indicating that this exchange of curses has more significance as ritualized shaming in verse, with each party trying to cow the other with curses rather than it being reflective of their character. Finally, Hervör is granted *Tyrfing* and leaves after thanking her father's spirit, before announcing that she felt "*heima í millim, er mik*

⁷² *Hervarar saga*, 6-10.

⁷³ Christopher Tolkien, "Introduction," in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, edited by G. Turville-Petre, xi-xx, (Kendal: Titus Wilson and Son, LTD., 1956), xi-xii, xv-xvi.

⁷⁴ *Hervarar saga*, 16.

umhverfis eldar brunnu.” This liminality between life and death, or rather between the realms (“*heima*”) of mortals and the supernatural cements both the supernatural status of the deceased *berserkir* and of Hervör herself, with the implication being her supernatural parentage was what let her be in such a liminal state and emerge unharmed.⁷⁵

Taking a critical analysis of the metatext of this early part of *Hervarar saga* yields some interesting finds, particularly in the use of verse within the narrative as well as the key points within the regular prose. There are three variations of *Hervarar saga*: R, H, and U with H and U stemming from a common source which branched from the main stemma sometime in the fourteenth century whereas R diverged and stems from the original branching on its own. Starting first with the saga’s description of Arngrimr and his home in Bólmr, where he settled after ending his service in *Garðariki* and is described as his ancestral home. While R states that it is in Sweden, being what is now the island of Bolmsö in Småland, the H manuscript gives the impression it is actually in Hålogaland, the extreme far north of Norway during the Norse period.⁷⁶ However, it is worth noting that the H variant is considered to be the most divergent of the three variations from the original text, particularly as compared to the R variant which makes the Swedish connection explicit, so the changing of the origin from Sweden to the extreme periphery of Norway ought to be taken with a critical eye.⁷⁷ The variants largely agree with how the fight on Samsey transpired, with Hjálmar’s dying alongside the twelve sons of Arngrimr and Oddr ultimately being the main champion of the episode. Again, this is notable because all the extant versions of the saga stem from a now-lost West Norse edition sometime in the thirteenth century, or perhaps even before, so the use of a Norwegian hero as a greater champion than his Swedish foes, and even his lone Swedish ally, is worth keeping in mind when attempting to find potential West Norse bias in the constructed narrative. As for the verse spoken between Hervör and her father’s spirit on Samsey, H has arguably the least corrupted version of the text, but even when compared to R (which has many corruptions and omits much) and U there is still large agreement, as would be expected from verse which is thought to be the oldest part of the saga.⁷⁸ Thus it bears out that Hervör stepped through that liminal space between life and death to retrieve *Tyrfing* from her father’s mound and that the sons of Arngrimr were not resting easy on

⁷⁵ *Hervarar saga*, 21, 22.

⁷⁶ G. Turville-Petre, “Notes” in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, 73-93, (Kendal: Titus Wilson and Son, LTD., 1956), 74.

⁷⁷ Tolkien, “Introduction,” xviii-xix.

⁷⁸ Turville-Petre, “Notes,” 76-77.

Samsey. If it is taken that the Swedish origin of all parties there is the original telling of the story, it sets the tone for the rest of the saga where those who hail from Sweden have a strong connection to the unseen world and can interact with it more freely than others, as is seen with *Heiðrekr* later in the narrative.

Chapter 5: *Draugr* and other supernatural humans in the *Íslendingasögur* and *Fornaldarsögur*

The *draugr*, violent restless dead who haunt the living after their own demise, feature heavily in the *íslendingasögur* as antagonists who are permanently put to rest by the saga's protagonist either through some kind of ritual or, more usually, by physically destroying or reintering the *draugr* in a remote location. The *draugr*, like *berserkir*, have common narrative elements which tie accounts of them together. The primary aspect of the *draugr* is their inherent violence toward the living, with their evil influence affecting those around them even when the *draugr* is not active by either causing illness and death, or driving those around them to madness. Similarly, they are also prone to "riding" the roofs of homesteads or other domestic buildings, making horrific noise and damaging the structures. In these two contexts the *draugr* could a supernatural framing of common environmental hazards in Iceland, with volcanic gasses causing then-inexplicable illness and brain damage, and sudden intense storms doing tremendous damage to buildings. The other common aspects of *draugr* are more personal, with those who die in conflict with their close kin or with intense unresolved grudges against the same being at particular risk of rising as *draugr* to take revenge. Likewise, those who die at the hands of a *draugr* or some other violent haunting were also believed to be at risk to become a *draugr*, requiring similar measures to be taken with their corpse to prevent their return.

In *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* one of the titular protagonist's most memorable foes, and one of the most memorable sequences in the *íslendingasögur* corpus, is his tremendous fight with Glámr, a Swedish shepherd who returns as a powerful and vicious *draugr* following his death at the hands of some mysterious haunt at yuletide who then begins a particularly violent haunting of the landscape where he was killed. The duel with Glámr becomes one of the most important chapters of the saga, as it ends in Glámr cursing Grettir after being defeated by the Icelandic champion, which is what ultimately leads to Grettir's downfall from a local hero to an outlaw chased to the very periphery of Icelandic society due to the bad luck which follows him afterward, which in turn forms the crux of *Grettis saga* as an "outlaw" *íslendingasögur* in that

from the very start both the main protagonist, the titular Grettir, is himself an outsider and other among the Icelanders, sometimes even more so than the monstrous beings he slays. Much scholarship has focused primarily on Grettir's character in the saga in relation to the beings he fights, highlighting his status as an outsider and other due to his roguish behavior which keeps him from being an accepted member of society despite his good intentions and deeds but very little is given to the character of Glámr despite his importance to the plot and what he represents both narratively and perhaps metaphysically in the context of the saga's creation.

From the start, Glámr is established as an other within the Icelandic context, with the narration explicitly describing him as a Swede rather than a native-born Icelander or Norwegian, as well as being hated by nearly everyone he encountered due to his hostile personality despite being an effective worker.⁷⁹ The episode directly preceding his death is interesting in the Christian context to the saga's narrative, as it serves only to explicitly establish Glámr as a non-Christian prior to his violent death. It is mentioned that Glámr never attended mass at the local church, and the narrative describes him as "*trúlauss*," at first implying some form of atheism or agnosticism.⁸⁰ However, the scene immediately after shows that Glámr not only does not hold the Christian faith, but actively spurns it as an unabashed heathen, with the narrative describing his actions at yuletide as:

Nú leið svá Þar til en kemer atfangadagr jóla; Þá stoð Glámr snimma upp ok kallaði til matar sins. Húsfreyja svarar: Ekki er Þat hátt kristinna manna, at mattask Þenna dag, því at á morgin er jóladagr inn fyrsti, segir hon, ok er því first skylt at fasta í dag. Han svarar Marga hindrvitni hafi þér, þá er ek sé til einskins koma; veit ek eigi, at monnum fari nú betr at heldr en þá, er menn fóru ekki með slíkt; Þótti mér þá betri siðr, er men váru heiðnir kallaðir, ok vil ek hafa minn, en engar refjur.⁸¹

Glámr's active hostility toward Christianity, and his nostalgia for paganism alongside his open insubordination and threatening behavior toward his master's wife, sets him up as a villainous character even in life, but it is interesting that he is the only character in *Grettis saga* who takes such an actively hostile stance toward Christianity and Christians. While "*trúlauss*"

⁷⁹ *Grettis saga*, 109-111.

⁸⁰ *Grettis saga*, 111.

⁸¹ *Grettis saga*, 111.

and pagan Icelanders still appear in the *Íslendingasögur* it is rare that they take such an actively-hostile attitude toward Christianity and Christians, instead either converting, or at least engaging in Christian ritual and behavior, or else remaining silent about the new faith. An example of this is Grettir's ill-fated attempt to reenter Christian society via an ecclesiastical trial following his outlawry for his unintentional acts of arson and manslaughter.⁸² Thus, it is likely that Glámr's hostility toward Christianity and favoring of paganism is meant to tie into his Swedish identity in the context of the Saga, both of which serve to other him in the context of the Icelandic society as presented in the saga's narrative. It is also possible that these two elements of Glámr's otherness are meant to be interrelated due to West Norse perceptions of Sweden and the Swedes in the context of the Christianization of the Norse world, with Sweden being the last of the Scandinavian realms to enter Christendom, something which remained in living memory for those in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Following his death at the hands of whatever malevolent force haunted the lands of his master on yuletide, Glámr returns as an extremely powerful and violent *draugr* who haunts the area. Like other accounts of *draugr*, Glámr haunts the area of his death by attacking livestock and shepherds, ultimately forcing the entire area to be abandoned due to his sheer violence.⁸³ The narrative particularly notes his tearing apart of roofs while "riding" the homesteads and his possessing cattle to gore each other after murdering his replacement in his former master's barn.⁸⁴ While up to this point Glámr's haunting parallels other accounts of *draugr* hauntings in its general formula, it is his fateful duel with Grettir which sets Glámr apart from other violent undead. Following a protracted wrestling match, Grettir forces Glámr outside where the moonlight allows him to make eye contact with Grettir, and it is at this point that Glámr curses the victorious Icelander. The narrative specifically notes that Glámr is special in this regard, stating "*því var meiri ófagnaðarkraptr með Glámi en flestum öðrum aptergöngumönnum.*"⁸⁵ The fact that Glámr apparently possessed more malign power than other *draugr* can perhaps be tied back into his status as a Swedish pagan in life, if indeed his status as such was meant to

⁸² *Grettis saga*, 132-133. I reference this episode that while Grettir is never explicitly said to be a Christian he was raised in a Christianized Iceland and was willing to engage in a Christian context in order to make good his societal standing, indicating he at least accepted the legitimacy of Christian Norse society, if only to fit in.

⁸³ *Grettis saga*, 113-116.

⁸⁴ *Grettis saga*, 115.

⁸⁵ *Grettis saga*, 121.

inherently tie him to the supernatural through not only his ethnicity but also through his personal beliefs in the old gods against the new faith which had come to Iceland.

Metatextually *Grettis saga* has little variation on the pertinent details of Glámr's character, with him consistently being described as a pagan Swede in all extant versions of the saga. Likewise, the nature of his death and the discovery of his corpse remain consistent throughout the extant variations, with the formulaic nature of the discovery of his corpse and rising as a *draugr* playing out as is typical for accounts of *draugr* hauntings. Likewise, his duel with Grettir and his description as a *draugr* of uncommon malicious power remains constant throughout the extant versions of the text, with only minor variations such as place names differing between the various editions.⁸⁶ This consistency throughout the variations indicates that Glámr's characterization as a violent, Swedish pagan who becomes an even more violent supernatural being of tremendous supernatural power is a key feature of the story which forms a crux of the narrative as both a character and a concept as he not only becomes the challenge Grettir had vocally yearned for in the immediate chapter before his introduction, but also is the way that he works to change set Grettir on his path to permanent outlawry.⁸⁷ The fact that this single character is given so much narrative weight, and is portrayed as deliberately as he is as not only a pagan, but also a Swede and also a supernatural being of great power, and that all of these traits remain constant, indicates that they are not to be taken individually but rather holistically as forming the basis for the character of Glámr and the way his character relates to the context and content of the rest of the narrative. Thus, it can be concluded that Glámr's status as a Swede was not merely just a convenient way to make him an other prior to his rising as a *draugr* and final destruction by Grettir, but instead is part of his personifying an older, more violent world before the advent of Christianity in the Norse world, who is eventually subdued by a hero who while not necessarily Christian himself engages within the Christian context which Glámr spurned.

The restless dead feature heavily in *Eyrbyggja saga*, both in benign and malevolent forms. Among the malevolent dead, Þorolf *baegifót* is the most infamous of these, becoming an exceedingly vicious *draugr* after his death and requiring several reburials and finally a massive wall to be built around his final resting place before ceasing to trouble the living.⁸⁸ Þorolf's

⁸⁶ *Grettis saga*, footnotes 107-121.

⁸⁷ *Grettis saga*, 106-107.

⁸⁸ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 69-71.

portrayal as an explicitly villainous West-Norse character, both in life and in death, is interesting, particularly in contrast with his son, Arnkell, who while antagonistic toward the saga's main protagonist is portrayed favorably by the narrative up to his death with none of his actions being directly condemned by the narrative, unlike his father, while also living up to the ideals of being straightforward, brave, and having immense physical prowess.⁸⁹ It is worthwhile considering the villainous portrayal of supernatural West Norse characters when taking a critical approach to Norse perspectives on both the supernatural and on the social world of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly when comparing them to villainous supernatural East Norse characters from either within the same narrative or from other sagas.

As a *draugr*, Þorolf's haunting follows the formulaic pattern of other accounts of *draugr* hauntings, first killing the oxen which had dragged his body to his initial resting place, then proceeding to target any livestock and shepherd who strayed too close to his cairn, savagely killing them if they were unable to escape. Þorolf's evil influence eventually becomes so toxic that the area around his cairn had to be abandoned as grazing land and any animal which came close to his cairn died instantly, and eventually the entire district is abandoned due to the haunting until Arnkell reburies his deceased father in a distant area with a large wall constructed around the new cairn for extra security.⁹⁰ The reason for Þorolf's villainous portrayal could be due to the sheer viciousness of his actions, both in life and as a *draugr*, with him representing the worst elements of the Icelandic farming society as well as the worst supernatural elements held in belief by the Norse. Like the berserk brothers, Þorolf is a disruption to the peace of the community and a direct threat to those around him, something which overrides his prior identity as an Icelander and farmer and turning him instead into a villainous other.

Interestingly, Þorolf from the start is portrayed negatively by the narrative, being a relative latecomer to Iceland who then seizes his land by killing another, more established landowner in *holmgang* and then administering his newly-acquired lands in a very harsh and unjust way.⁹¹ While the duel itself is not portrayed as necessarily evil or unjust, with the narrative explicitly citing Þorolf's opponent as old and heirless as justification for his challenge, it does draw a parallel to other foreign, despoiling characters like Ljot who seize their wealth

⁸⁹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 75-76.

⁹⁰ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 69-71.

⁹¹ *Eyrbyggja saga*, 9-10.

through violence, rather than by their own work or by birthright, and then abuse their positions after. Likewise, Þorolf's abusive behavior toward his kin and neighbors, such as attempting to arson the farmstead of his neighbor and former bondsman, highlights his status as an antagonist within the narrative and an other in the Icelandic society portrayed by the saga, serving as juxtaposition against the honorable and favorably-portrayed Snorri *goði* and Arnkell.⁹² Thus, while not a Swede, Þorolf likely was not meant to be considered a true Iclander either with his status as a villain and life and a monster and death reinforcing the need for vigilance against foreign men who would disrupt the peace and bring ruin on their new communities, putting him in a similar context to Glámr, Ljot, and the berserk brothers from *Eyrbyggja saga*.

Having looked at the examples of *draugr* and other violent supernatural attention must now be given to those supernatural who do not fit as cleanly into any prior category. For the sake of brevity, the examples given, all from *Hervarar saga*, have been included in this chapter rather than divided into their own. After the first chapters of *Hervarar saga*, wherein Hervör lives as a Viking for some years before marrying a Swedish noble and settling in his home, Hervör's son, Heiðrekr, is banished from his family's realm and eventually travels to and becomes the king of *Hreiðgotaland*, which the saga identifies as the Carpathian territories settled by the Ostrogoths, and is described as an extremely powerful temporal leader as well as a powerful cult leader as well, with both of his roles closely tied to his family's association with the god Óðinn. The narrative explicitly describes his presiding over grandiose sacrifices to the god in return for patronage, a holdover from his family's position as Swedish aristocracy who took patronage from Óðinn as *berserkir*. This is first demonstrated when Heiðrekr comes into conflict with his father-in-law, Haraldr, due to a prophecy which stated the highest-born son in *Hreiðgotaland* must be sacrificed to alleviate a severe famine, which Haraldr and Heiðrekr both claim to be the other's child.⁹³ Heiðrekr deceives the powerful chieftains of the realm into swearing fealty to him, and from there leads them in battle against Haraldr where the latter and most of his host is killed, with Heiðrekr consecrating the casualties of the battle as sacrifice to Óðinn to alleviate the famine without the need to sacrifice his own son.⁹⁴ This has obvious parallels to *Ynglinga saga*'s account of both the wars waged by the euhemerized Óðinn where he would claim his dead

⁹² *Eyrbyggja saga*, 62-64.

⁹³ *Hervarar saga*, 26-29.

⁹⁴ *Hervarar saga*, 28-30.

enemies as sacrifice, and to the sacrificing of the *Ynglingar* monarchs in times of hardship. In both cases, such events were strongly tied spatially to Sweden, particularly regarding the need for sacrificing high-born men to maintain *ár ok friður* within the realm.⁹⁵ It is likely, then, that Snorri extrapolated these instances in *Ynglinga saga* from the same material which forms the basis for the same plot points of *Hervarar saga*. It is interesting, though, that while Heiðrekr performs his sacrifices in *Hreiðgotaland* the sacrifices of *Ynglinga saga* are tied inherently to the realm of Sweden, as Snorri makes no attempt to suggest that such sacrifices for *ár ok friður* were common elsewhere. Thus, if the same base material Snorri extrapolated the narrative of *Ynglinga saga* does share roots with the basis of *Hervarar saga*, it could be another example of Sweden being seen as an inherently supernatural locale within the oldest orality held by the Norse. Likewise, just within the context of *Hervarar saga* these parallels combined with the nebulous identity of *Hreiðgotaland* beyond its location on the Danube, with its apparent proximity to Saxony, Denmark, Russia, and the Hunnic steppe creates a fantastical image of a mythic eastern Sweden, similar to Snorri's description of *Sviðioð inn mikla*, which lies separate from the more mundane, yet still temporally powerful, Swedish realms described earlier in the saga. So even though *Hreiðgotaland* is meant to stand in for the Carpathian regions settled by the Ostrogoths, specifically those regions along the Danube river, it still does not negate that Heiðrekr himself is deeply rooted to Sweden in his identity, through both his maternal and paternal lineage, and that the sacrifices he precedes over have mythological ties back to his place of origin through his family's ever-present connection with Óðinn. This comes a head at the very end of the saga's narrative which describes Heiðrekr's descendant, Ivar, returning to Sweden and becoming king there thus bringing his family's history full circle, further linking the saga's narrative focus on Sweden as a place of innate supernatural and temporal power.⁹⁶

Chapter 6: The sociohistorical context of Sweden

The historic and social context of Sweden during the Viking Age could also play a part in the portrayal of the Swedes and Sweden in the Sagas, Sweden was the last of the Scandinavian realms to Christianize, despite vigorous missions from dioceses in Germany, and even though it is evident that Christianity became widely popular before the realm itself was considered part of Christendom the fact that pre-Christian belief remained such a major part of the public life for

⁹⁵ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 13-14, 14-15, 18.

⁹⁶ *Hervarar saga*, 67-71.

longer than in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland would have been notable among the Christian Norse and from there could have inspired a perception of the Swedes as being somehow closer to the pre-Christian belief or otherwise opposed to the Christian faith like is portrayed by characters like Glámr in *Grettis saga*.

Going solely from archaeological evidence from Gamla Uppsala, it is clear that the temple and authority complexes there were the most monumental sites in Viking Age Scandinavia and likely the greatest hub of both cult and temporal authority among the East Norse, if not all of the Norse across mainland Scandinavia. The site itself first became permanently inhabited as a polity rather than a loose collection of agricultural settlements some time during the Migration Period circa the fifth century.⁹⁷ It is during the next two centuries that the royal mounds of Gamla Uppsala were raised, indicating that between the fifth and seventh centuries the Uppland region became a major political center and likely a major cult center as well.⁹⁸ The presence of a chieftain's hall in such close proximity to the monumental mounds would be a strong show of both political and spiritual power for those who claimed the region, and this is supported by the mentions of Gamla Uppsala as a major political site in unrelated works.⁹⁹ There is a marked shift in the landscape of Gamla Uppsala by the mid-sixth to seventh centuries as definite signs of both monumentalism and centralization appear. From the earlier migration period there was a steady abandoning of the farmlands based around the river valleys in favor of continuous buildup of the sites directly surrounding the barrows and the agrarian settlements there.¹⁰⁰ By the mid-sixth century there were at least three monumental constructions constructed upon artificial terraces built up from the surrounding ground, which archeologists who have examined the material from the site's most-recent excavation believe to be large manors or halls meant for housing the local elite.¹⁰¹ Along with the major construction of monumental buildings, there is evidence to suggest that the burial mounds themselves were enlarged in the eighth century near the start of the Viking Age as part of this monumentalizing process, with extra earth added to the barrows in order to expand both their diameter and their

⁹⁷ Bo Gräslund, "Gamla Uppsala during the Migration Period" in *Myth, Might, and Man: Ten Essays on Gamla Uppsala*, edited by Gunnel Friberg. 6-13, (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetets förlag, 2000), 7.

⁹⁸John Ljungqvist and Paul Frölund, "Gamla Uppsala: The Emergence of a Centre and a Magnate Complex," *Journal of Archaeology and Ancient History* 16, (December 22, 2015), 1-30 (independent .PDF), 6, 11.

⁹⁹ Gräslund, "Gamla Uppsala," 8-9. Ljungqvist, 26.

¹⁰⁰ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 7-9.

¹⁰¹ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 9.

height.¹⁰² The building-up of the mound is interesting in the context of Gamla Uppsala as both an administrative center and important cult site as the barrows have both temporal and supernatural importance. Gravemounds were considered by the pre-Christian Norse to be liminal places between the realms of the mundane/living and the supernatural/dead, and also served as the active homes of those interred within. This is seen in the treatment of burial mounds as liminal sites and the existence of *haugbui*, undead who are distinct from *draugr*, in both *fornaldarsögur* and *íslendingasögur* including *Grettis saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Hervarar saga*, *Örvar-Oddrs Saga*, and so on.¹⁰³ Thus, the building up the mounds at Gamla Uppsala as part of the monumentalizing phase the site went through during the Vendel period has both temporal and supernatural connotations, as the building up of the mounds not only created a more-spectacular visual presentation of the site, it was the building up of the space between life and death and the refurbishment of the homes of the now-past nobility who were interred within. Again, this reinforces the notion of Gamla Uppsala as a place of tremendous temporal power and prestige, as well as a site with strong cultic and supernatural connotations. Likewise, these events occurring nearly six centuries before the period when the sagas were produced would give ample time for the reality of the situation to merge into the oral tradition of the Norse peoples to become a part of the living mythology of the pre-Christian tradition. Thus, it follows that West Norse writers and scholars who did not necessarily have first-hand experience with Swedish people or Sweden would use this concept of the Swedes and Sweden being so innately tied to the supernatural as they translated the sagas from their oral context to the first saga literature.

Within the magnate complex at Gamla Uppsala, it is known that there was a singularly massive and grandiose structure there which stood in proximity and shared context with the equally-impressive living spaces and workshops of the complex.¹⁰⁴ While the archaeological evidence is still inconclusive to the building's true purpose, there are several elements which hint toward it being either the great temple at Gamla Uppsala, or at the very least its inspiration. The temple at Gamla Uppsala was a known concept in the Norse oral tradition, as it is referenced both in Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglinga saga* as being the work of the euhemerized Freyr, as well as in the Latin works of the Christian writer Adam of Bremen who based his accounts on the stories

¹⁰² Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 9-10.

¹⁰³ Visovan, "The *Draugr*," 128-131.

¹⁰⁴ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 14-18.

shared with him by those who had seen it. According to Adam's account, the temple at Uppsala hosted three statues serving as idols arranged in a row with Þórr being the largest and middle idol with representations of Óðinn and Freyr flanking it, he also gives several lurid accounts of blood sacrifice, including the sacrifice of humans, at the temple.¹⁰⁵ The temple itself allegedly stood until the mid-eleventh century until it was destroyed in a fire, the context of which is still heavily debated by scholarship. While the original notion was that the temple was destroyed by Christian Norseman to accelerate the Christianization of Sweden and deplatform the pre-Christian belief system, there is evidence which indicates this grand structure, if indeed it is the temple, was deliberately burned as some sort of ritual.¹⁰⁶

While none of these idols, if they ever existed as reported by Adam of Bremen, survived the temple's destruction there is archaeological evidence from the site which indicates it was not only an important temporal structure, but a highly prestigious and powerful cultic site. The most evident aspect of the building is that it was singularly massive even within the context of the other monumental structures of the complex, being fifty meters long by twelve wide, and apparently was the tallest buildings in the complex judging by the remains of the supporting stave holes.¹⁰⁷ The construction also displays a tremendous degree of architectural precision as well as a clear intention toward monumentalism with the building being a large central chamber flanked on its north and south ends by entrance chambers divided from the central chamber by inner doors.¹⁰⁸ If the current scholarly conjecture about the size of the building is correct, it would be the largest single structure north of the Alps, with the only other complex coming close to scale and scope being the royal complex in Jelling, Denmark, which itself bears strong connotations of at least powerful temporal leadership in Vendel Period and Viking Age Sweden, which perhaps inspired the notions of Sweden being a place of nobility in the sagas.

Beyond just the physical scope and scale of the construction at the Gamla Uppsala temple complex, what extant evidence there is of the decoration of the building itself indicates toward the purpose of inspiring awe, perhaps religious terror, in those who saw it first-hand. The door hinges were crafted to resemble bent spear heads, and the doors themselves were approximately

¹⁰⁵ Adam of Bremen, *History*, 205-215.

¹⁰⁶ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 19-20.

¹⁰⁷ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 17.

¹⁰⁸ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 18.

three and half meters wide, large enough to allow carts and large processions through at once.¹⁰⁹ The mimicry of weapons in the building's construction has several connotations related to the pre-Christian mythology of the Norse peoples, with Óðinn of course being heavily connected to spears as weapons both through his association with his own personal spear, *Gungnir*, his own self-sacrifice via hanging and spear as related in the *Poetic Edda*, as well as the tradition related by Snorri Sturluson in *Ynglinga saga* of marking sacrifices to Óðinn with spears or by hurling a spear over them.¹¹⁰ There is some archaeological evidence for a kind of spear-throwing ritual accompanying funeral rites, such as the famous woman's grave at Birka where part of the discoveries made was a spear lodged in the wall of the grave pit, as if thrown over the woman's head from where she was placed on her chair in the grave, or otherwise was deliberately lodged there as to rest hanging over the deceased.¹¹¹ While this isn't suggesting some direct connection between the Gamla Uppsala complex and Birka, beyond common practices shared by the Viking-Age East Norse, the Birka grave does demonstrate a common thread which obviously had presence in the Norse oral tradition which served as the basis for the sagas. The symbolism behind the spears as an integral part of the doorways, physical liminal spaces implying a metaphysical liminal space, is telling, as even if it was not necessarily meant to be a direct link to the cult of Óðinn at Gamla Uppsala, it is a deliberate display meant to stick in the minds of those who witnessed it, thus becoming part of the cultural long memory of the people as a whole which then is transformed into living mythology. Likewise, the positioning of the doors along with their great size would seem to indicate the intention of allowing continuous movement in and through the building, such as a large ritual procession.¹¹² The walls too were of interesting composition, indicating that the external wall was designed for weather proofing where the inner wall was wattle and daub with a coating of lime.¹¹³ On its own, this lime-coated wattle and daub would have given the interior walls of the building a smooth, white surface which would certainly stand out among the rougher plank-walled buildings typical of Viking Age Scandinavia, however, it is also worth considering that these walls would have been ideal for extensive decoration such as painting, which would not have survived the building's destruction and subsequent burying.

¹⁰⁹ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 17.

¹¹⁰ Snorri, *Ynglinga saga*, 6, 12-13.

¹¹¹ Neil Price, et al. "Viking warrior women? Reassessing Birka chamber grave Bj. 581," *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (February 2019) 181-198, 186-191.

¹¹² Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 17.

¹¹³ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 17.

Having a highly-decorated interior alongside its monumental exterior would have made the building highly memorable regardless of context, and if it was a temple rather than some other building then indeed such a visual spectacle could be the basis for an oral tradition which would link that locale to the supernatural via the monumentality mimicking the most grandiose *Æsir* or *Jótunn*-made buildings within the mythology. There is also some evidence to suggest that the destruction of this monumental building was an intentional act by whatever group controlled the site rather than an act of arson by a hostile force, which reinforces the possibility of this building being the famous temple at Gamla Uppsala. John Ljungqvist cites several pieces of archaeological evidence which indicate a ritualistic aspect to the burning of the building, primarily the clearing of debris after the burning and the internment of horse and other animal bones along with the burnt remains which was then deliberately covered with a layer of clay.¹¹⁴ Considering that the temple and magnate complex at Gamla Uppsala was known to Christian writers in the Holy Roman Empire it is evident that it was a place of tremendous import even after its destruction, and a location which would have remained within the cultural consciousness as both a memory of a physical space alongside a separate, non-physical notion of religious and temporal power transcending anything else known within the region.

Given this focus on pre-Christian Sweden, and the establishment of such monumental spaces by the cultic and temporal authorities, it is easy to forget that Sweden was the last of the three main Scandinavian realms to join Christendom, with the formal establishment of Christianity in Denmark and Norway predating the establishment of a native diocese in Sweden.¹¹⁵ While there were several missions conducted in Sweden by Christian evangelists in the centuries prior to the formal establishment of the Christian Church in Sweden, for the sake of this paper entering Christendom is defined as when the first permanent Church diocese was established in the realm, or otherwise had Christianity legally established as the public faith as in Iceland.¹¹⁶ The first Swedish archbishopric was granted Papal dispensation in 1164, over one hundred years following the conversion of Iceland and just under a century after Norway's entrance into Christendom, with the first Swedish archbishop having his seat in a cathedral built

¹¹⁴ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 18-20.

¹¹⁵ Anne Catherine Bonnier, "From Pagan Temple to Parish Church" in *Myth, Might, and Man: Ten Essays on Gamla Uppsala*, edited by Gunnel Friberg. 41-50, (Stockholm: Riksantikvarieämbetets förlag, 2000), 41.

¹¹⁶ Ari Þorgilsson, *Íslendingabók*, edited by Vald Ásmundarson, (Reykjavik: Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1891), 12-14.

at Gamla Uppsala.¹¹⁷ It is worth noting that the establishment of the first Swedish diocese is contemporaneous with when it is believed the very earliest versions of the sagas were composed as literature in Iceland, near the end of the twelfth century. This late establishment of the first Swedish diocese, combined with the fact that the temple at Gamla Uppsala was only destroyed in the eleventh century, means that for these West Norse writers, Sweden's status as being outside Christendom would be living memory, and thus could lead to the notion among the West Norse that the Swedes were still not yet as Christian as they were.¹¹⁸ The status of Sweden being outside Christendom, the living memory of the pre-Christian Norse belief still having a strong base in Sweden, and Iceland's own relatively early conversion and the strong cultural influence of the Icelandic bishops in the context of Icelandic literature all likely influenced the portrayal of the Swedes and Sweden in the sagas, particularly in the *Íslendingasögur* where the Christian context of the West Norse world is more strongly felt due to the sagas describing more contemporaneous events in a more modern, relatively speaking, than the *fornaldarsögur* which predate the coming of Christianity to the Norse world by centuries.

The concept of Sweden being somehow more innately tied to the supernatural as compared to Norway, Denmark, or Iceland may also have its basis in the established cosmography of the Norse corpus where cardinal east was considered to be the direction away from established civilization and the path of the realms of the inhuman such as *Jótunheim*. Sweden, being the east-most of the mainland Scandinavian realms, would be familiar to the Norse and understood as related to Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, yet at the same time being closer to the supernatural territories demarcated simply as 'the east'.¹¹⁹ Earlier scholars of pre-modern Norse cosmography originally attributed a view of a concentric universe to the Norse, where the world of men *Miðgarðr*, lies at the center as a ring with an internal and external sea, understood as the Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans when applied to a flat-world model, and beyond that lying the fantastic wilderness of *Jótunheim*, *Ásgarðr*, and other realms inaccessible to the mundane human.¹²⁰ However, Kevin Wanner in his research posits that this concentric cosmography may be flawed, instead positing that it could be valid to interpret *Miðgarðr* as a "girdle" splitting the world roughly down the center from a slightly-west justification, and being

¹¹⁷ Bonnier, "From Pagan Temple," 44-46.

¹¹⁸ Ljungqvist, "Gamla Uppsala," 19-20.

¹¹⁹ Wanner, "Off-Center," 39.

¹²⁰ Wanner, "Off-Center," 41-43.

flanked on either side by the inhuman realms, rendering the mundane world of man very thin in the greater scheme of the cosmos.¹²¹ As evidence he points toward literary mentions of cardinal directions in the mythological corpus, particularly mentions of the far-north and far-east. Mentions of the extreme north, along with descending, are consistently referenced alongside mentions of death and travel to the underworld, whereas travel to the far-east with no movement beyond the lateral is used in the mentions of *Pórr* in his exploits against the *Jótnar* either in *Jótunheim* or in the more nebulous, singularly-mentioned *Útgarðr*.¹²²

Beyond this, the idea that the gods either shared a space with humanity or otherwise existed in a far western realm is also a possibility, which would make Iceland the cosmographically closest to the realm of the supernatural which mankind respected rather than feared, whereas Sweden sat closer to the edge of where monsters, *Jótnar*, and other feared supernatural had their abode.¹²³ While this does not necessarily fit with the cosmography of medieval Christianity, it is possible to conjecture that some notion of this west-justified cosmography could have lingered after the Christianization of the Norse world which, when combined with the very real history regarding the late Christianization of Sweden compared to Iceland, could also have formed a basis for the Icelandic composers of the sagas to think of Sweden as a, quite literally, God-forsaken place where the malign supernatural has deeper roots than in Iceland where the Christian faith was more quickly accepted. Wanner also points out that there has been some prior conjecture to the Norse cosmography, with the understanding that the natural physical reference for direction for the saga composers would be the Norwegian coastline, which tacks east and north as it goes along. Thus, it has been conjectured by some that mentions in the sagas and Eddas of north and east being directions of the feared supernatural, the far northern frontier of Norway, then largely the domain of the aboriginal Sami people rather than the Norse, would be a natural stand-in for the lands of the malign supernatural.¹²⁴ However, by this same thinking the same interpretation could more readily be applied to Sweden, as it lies not only farther east than Norway but shares both land and maritime borders with the Finnic, Slavic, and Baltic regions which the Norse had contact with via trade and warfare, and are

¹²¹ Wanner, "Off-Center," 43-45, 49-50.

¹²² Wanner, "Off-Center," 45-48.

¹²³ Wanner, "Off-Center," 49-51.

¹²⁴ Wanner, "Off-Center," 50-51.

known to have considered as ‘others’ within both the pre-Christian and Christian context.¹²⁵ If one takes this idea of Norse cosmography, that is to say a west-justified cosmos with *Miðgarðr* as an uneven strip rather than as a concentric circle, as correct, this would put Sweden even deeper into the liminal area between *Miðgarðr* and the realm of the inhuman, transforming the entire landscape into a borderland between the mundane and the supernatural, thus attaching an even greater supernatural weight to the landscape of Sweden as it exists within the mythological corpus of the Norse and explaining why a West Norse writer who may not have had direct experience with anything east of Iceland or Norway would be prone to drawing inspiration from this more fantastic interpretation of their eastern cousins when composing works involving both an ancient, mythic time and a liminal, mythic space.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Having examined both the literature and the extant material evidence there is a strong element of the supernatural in the pre-literary oral tradition of the Norse which holds the ancient Swedes and Sweden at its core, alongside themes of temporal authority and effectively-wielded power. However, there is also a marked shift between the saga genres, where in *fornaldarsögur* the Swedes are those closest to the gods, be they euhemerized sorcerer-kings as in *Ynglinga saga* or actual deities as in *Hervarar saga*, who likewise wield tremendous temporal power as chieftains and kings to be reckoned with. By contrast, in the *Íslendingasögur* the Swedes, while still possessing a distinct closeness to the supernatural as compared to their West Norse cousins, are lowly outsiders, either as much hated simple laborers like Glámr in *Grettis saga* or otherwise just debased bandits to be killed by the worthier West Norse protagonist like Ljot *inn blæki* of *Egils saga*. Even when they are men of status, like the *berserkir* brothers in *Eyrbyggja saga*, their inability to conform to the Icelandic ideal leads to their humiliating destruction, a far cry from the champions presented in other mythology. Focusing first on the Swedes as a people, the accounts of powerful chieftains and cult leaders which pervade the *fornaldarsögur* and as exemplified by King *Heiðrekr* and the euhemerized *Æsir* and *Vanir* are likely the holdover and extrapolation of the extant oral tradition as word spread of the monumental construction and the centralization of power in the Uppland around the magnate complex at Gamla Uppsala. The sheer scope and scale of both building and cult activity at the Uppsala complexes were likely a

¹²⁵ Wanner, “Off-Center,” 49-50.

deliberate play at emulating the gods in the mortal world by creating such spectacular spaces within a liminal, supernatural context with their proximity to the more-ancient burial mounds of the region, and from there the legend surrounding these places and activities would merge into the most ancient oral accounts of the supernatural within the landscape which in turn inspired the medieval accounts of such things following the Christianization of the Norse and the physical destruction of the Uppsala complex. Given the *fornaldarsögur* are based on the oldest oral material as compared to the *íslendingasögur* thus it follows that these sagas would draw from an oral tradition which describes Sweden as a place of power, which in turn was drawn from the living mythology generated by the monumental cult and authority sites of central Sweden.

Following this, given how Sweden converted later than Denmark, Norway, or Iceland, and that the sagas were produced within the Christian West Norse context when Sweden's status as being outside Christendom was still in living memory, it follows then that these West Norse writers when utilizing oral material about Swedes and Sweden when composing the sagas would be more prone to either not applying a Christian interpretation to those supernatural elements which persisted, as in describing what was once attributed to the pre-Christian gods now as a miracle rather than just applying a Christian context, which is evident throughout the sagas, or perhaps even applied supernatural and pagan themes where such things were not explicit before. Characters like Ljot inn blæki in *Egils saga* and especially Glámr in *Grettis saga* stand out within the narrative as not only is their Swedish identity made explicit, but also their paganism and their violent attitude toward the established order of the West Norse context they are introduced in. The specific intersection of the violence, the paganism, and their identity at Swedes is an intentional narrative by the West Norse composers, drawing from the earlier oral traditions of the ancient Swedes which inspired the *fornaldarsögur* but now given a specifically villainous connotation through the Christianization of the Norse context and particularly through the context of the *íslendingasögur*. Going forward, those references within the saga corpus to Swedish characters and Sweden as a locale alongside overt references to the supernatural or the monstrous should be reexamined with a new critical eye. These inclusions within the saga narrative can perhaps give scholarship new insight into how the West Norse perceived both themselves and others in their context, as well as how the same interpreted their mythic past in conjunction with what remained in the cultural long memory.

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