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The Pursuit of Honour: An Analysis of Travel, Honour and Masculinity

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Master's thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

MAS4091 (30 ECTS)

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University of Oslo

Spring 2022

Summary

In the *Íslendingasögur* young men often travel abroad. In this thesis I analyse these travels and the events that follow them and the connection between these events and honour, status and masculinity.

In recent decades, the field of gender studies has received considerable attention. Scholars of medieval Norse-Icelandic literature have used and applied this knowledge to the literature of medieval Scandinavia. However, the main focus of most of these studies are women. Though this is of course an important area of study, it is impossible to paint a complete, comprehensive picture of gender without regarding men and masculinities. Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage will be used as a lens with which to view the aforementioned travels. His rites of passage are reflected in the journeys abroad of the young men in the *Íslendingasögur*. The discussion on masculinity will mainly draw on the hegemonic masculinity model as developed by R. W. Connell, which states that one form of masculinity is culturally exalted. The discussion of the *Íslendingasögur* will be limited to a selection of sagas. These are: *Bandamanna saga*, *Egils saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Finnboga saga*, *Grœnlendinga saga*, *Kormáks saga*, *Laxdœla saga*, *Njáls saga*, and *Víga-Glúms saga*. I have chosen these sagas since they contain one or more journey abroad. During their travels young men encounter adversaries whom they bravely fight, proving their fighting skills and physical fitness; garnering much respect and honour on account of it. Successful journeys can aid in pursuing betrothal and marriage. Marriage could also enhance a man's status. After settling down, which often included coming into one's inheritance and owning your own property, men continue to prove their worth through victories in judicial processes. Though travel could greatly increase a man's status, it did not necessarily have the same connotations for women in the *Íslendingasögur*. After discussing the ways in which men could gain respect, I then turn to look at how these aspects are dealt with in *Njáls saga*, as *Njáls saga* has a tendency to subvert expectations regarding narrative patterns and traditions.

Acknowledgements

When I applied for this master’s degree, little did I know what the world had in store for us. Starting a new degree and having to move abroad will always bring certain challenges, but having to do so during a pandemic did not necessarily make it easier. The last two years have not been altogether bad, however. I have made wonderful new friends, seen unbelievable sights, and had amazing experiences I otherwise would not have had. Oh, and I learned a thing or two about Vikings. All I have left to say now, is a massive thank you to all the people who made these last two years a little brighter.

I would like to thank Kristen, my supervisor, for her invaluable advise and support.

I want to thank all of the faculty members who have taught me both at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík and at the University of Oslo, for their support and encouragement.

I want to thank my family for their unwavering support, for their encouragement, and for the packages from home filled with Dutch snacks. Ik hou van jullie.

I want to thank all of my friends, far and near, for all the dinners, wine and cheese nights, movie nights, knit nights, hot chocolate outings, baked goods, and laughs and joy you have given me. It means the world to me.

Finally, I want to thank Bran for getting enthusiastic and subsequently confused whenever he hears my voice on the phone. And I want to thank Lewis for walking in and out of frame of the video calls completely disinterested. Thank you for keeping me humble, my furry friends.

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Introduction

In this thesis I will discuss how boys became men in medieval Iceland. I will view this through the lens of voyages abroad and Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage. I will also look into how this affects honour, status and masculinity. I will focus my discussion on young men entering adulthood that do so in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Material

The *Íslendingasögur*, or the Icelandic Family Sagas, are a group of sagas which centre on the lives of Icelandic people. The sagas often span a time from shortly before the settlement of Iceland, ca. 870, to the conversion, which happened in 999 or 1000, or a few decades after that. Although many of the saga characters travel abroad the main part of the action is set in Iceland and usually revolves around a feud, familial or otherwise.[1] The sagas were mainly written down during the thirteenth century, though some are a bit younger. The *Íslendingasögur* are often seen as historical documents, as 'the action is set in a realistic framework, where topography, chronology and personal names are taken from the record'.[2] However, this does not mean that the sagas accurately represent the time they are set in. As Vésteinn Ólason mentions:

> […] it is not possible to say that the world presented in the sagas is identical with the world in which the events related took place, or with the world at the time that they were written. The text presents the ideas and attitudes prevalent at the time of writing about a past that was in many ways different from that time.[3]

We cannot be certain as to how accurately the sagas depict the past. As the historicity of the *Íslendingasögur* cannot be adequately ascertained, I will be discussing the travels young men undertake and their consequences as a literary construct, not as an historical reality.

Theory

For my discussion on masculinity I will use the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity was first outlined by R. W. Connell in her book *Masculinities*. With

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[1] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas,' in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 101.
[2] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983), 33.
[3] Ólason, 'Family Sagas,' 102.

the growing recognition of intersectionality, that is, the interplay between gender, race and class (and other components of one's identity), first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, comes the recognition of the fact that there is more than one kind of masculinity. Connell writes: ''Hegemonic masculinity' is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.'[4] At any given time, one form of masculinity is culturally exalted. Over time, the culturally exalted form of masculinity changes. Gareth Lloyd Evans, writing about Connell's theory, explains that the multiplicity of masculinities means that the masculinities that do not live up to the hegemonic ideal are subordinated to it, and thus viewed as inferior. These subordinate masculinities are nevertheless still viewed as masculine: 'deviation from the masculine ideal does not invariably imply feminization.'[5]

For my discussion of the voyages abroad I will be mainly drawing on the theory of Van Gennep, the inventor of the term *rites de passages* 'rites of passage'. Van Gennep was an anthropologist and folklorist and is well known for his foundational work *The Rites of Passage*, in which he discusses several rites of passage, such as birth, childhood, puberty and marriage, in various cultures. He argues that a rite of passage, in which a person moves from one social situation into another (in this case from childhood into adulthood), consists of three stages: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation.[6] During the rites of separation the person to be initiated leaves their previous environment. In this case this is leaving not only the parental home, but leaving Icelandic society behind as they journey abroad. During the transition rites the person starts proving themselves as being ready for their new position, for example as a warrior. Once this stage is complete, they can return to their previous environment where they are incorporated into their new status by their families, usually by way of some kind of ceremony.

Methodology

I am using the hegemonic masculine model because I believe this model lends itself very well to the study of sagas. As Evan's has stated in his *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, the hegemonic model allows the presence of multiple masculinities and does not have a strict framework for an ideal masculinity, we can study the characters without having to

[4] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 76.
[5] Gareth Lloyd Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.
[6] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 10-11.

resort to viewing characters who do not display a hegemonic form of masculinity as unmasculine. In fact, the model is aware that most people (or in this case, characters) will not live up to such an ideal. This is a rather accurate reflection of how gender is represented in the sagas, and of how readers perceive the gender of the characters. The model also allows for masculinities to change.[7]

Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* is, to this day, very influential, and has even become 'anthropological commonplace'.[8] It is for this reason that I am using his work.

Research history

Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to talk about intersectionality in her influential article 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'.[9] In this article Crenshaw demonstrates that gender is influenced by an individual's race. This article was written during the late 1980's, about the way black women were discriminated against in the court of law in America. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality has been expanded to incorporate religion, sexuality, class, age, one's physical ability, and other components that constitute a person's identity. They are all axes that intersect in how gender is experienced and perceived. In her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler argued that gender is culturally constructed. If gender is constructed, it follows that gender and sex are no longer connected. The result of this disconnection is that 'gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.'[10] It is largely due to black feminists that we now have the insight that there are multiple modes of femininity and that there are multiple ways of being a woman.[11] Along with the recognition of multiple femininities came also the recognition of multiple masculinities. Connell, in response to inter-sectionality and the recognition of multiple masculinities, writes that there is a danger to assume

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[7] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 21.

[8] Terrence Turner, 'Transformation, Hierarchy and Transcendence: A Reformulation of Van Gennep's Model of the Structure of Rites de Passage,' in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 53.

[9] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139-167.

[10] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

[11] Rachel Alsop, Annette Fitzsimons and Kathleen Lennon, ed., *Theorizing Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 2-3 and 74-79.

that there is '*a* black masculinity or *a* working-class masculinity.'[12] Thus, she developed the hegemonic masculinity model, which allows for multiple masculinities, one of which is culturally exalted. In studying gender in medieval Scandinavia Carol Clover has developed a model which suggests that medieval Icelandic society had a 'one-sex, one-gender model with a vengeance' in which characters are either *hvatr* (bold, hard) or *blauðr* (soft) instead of masculine or feminine.[13] Clover argued that

> to the extent that we can speak of a social binary, a set of two categories, into which all persons were divided, the fault line runs not between males and females per se, but between able-bodied men (and the exceptional woman) on one hand and, on the other, a kind of rainbow coalition of everyone else (most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men).[14]

Though her theory is certainly influential, it is also certainly not uncontested. The sagas used to support her theory are selective, and saga literature provides many examples in which the two categories (man and woman) are distinguished.[15] Gareth Lloyd Evans has shown that biological sex is significant in the sagas, for example in *Laxdæla saga*, where Auðr is accused of wearing breeches with a codpiece and long leggings, i.e. masculine clothing, '*sem karlkonur*' (like a masculine woman).[16] As the compound *karlkonur* indicates, Auðr, while she is being gendered masculine, still retains her female status.[17] This accusation results in her nickname Bróka-Auðr, (Breeches-Auðr). Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has argued that '[s]ociety was to a very great extent based on an aggressive masculine ethic.'[18] Evans notes that although this may well be part of, or a form of, the hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic masculine characters had to

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[12] Connell, *Masculinities*, 76.
[13] Carol J. Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Speculum* 68, no. 2 (April 1993); 386-387.
[14] Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' 380.
[15] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 12; Gareth Lloyd Evans, 'Female Masculinity and the Sagas of Icelanders,' in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 60; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 7-8; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, 'Gender,' in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London: Routledge, 2017), 234.
[16] *Laxdæla saga*, 96; Keneva Kunz, trans., 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 334.
[17] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 13. For more examples see pages 12-14.
[18] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, 21.

> act heroically (which includes the display of physical and martial prowess); must be bold, sincere, and responsible (actions must have good cause, the person must not be overly domesticated, and must not prefer sexual relations to physical labour); must act according to the dictates of honour at all times (must be willing and able to exact due vengeance, and must act amicably with kinsmen); must adhere to alimentary taboos; and must not take part in 'irregular' sexual practices.[19]

As an anthropologist Van Gennep, the coiner of rites of passage, thought that the life of an individual consisted of a series of passages 'from one age to another or from one occupation to another.'[20] He focussed his discussion on the transitions between generations or occupations which occupied many tribal rites. Victor and Edith Turner turned to consider the liminal transitional stage and considered the 'spiritual rituals of medieval religious practice.'[21] Within Van Gennep's outline of the rituals of an individual's life the Turners saw a template which was applicable to entire societies. The Turners seemed more interested in the 'textures and meanings' of transition itself, rather than the consequences these rituals might have for the progression of an individual.[22] In *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* the Turners look at pilgrimage as a liminoid (that is to say open, optative, not conceptualized as religious routine) phenomenon, which suggests that travel (in their case, pilgrimage) is an essential part of a rite of passage.[23] In his book *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events*, Don Handelman argues for the use of the term 'ritual of transformation' instead of rite of passage. He argues that in the rites of passage as described by Van Gennep immature adolescents turn into mature adults; thereby changing the fundamental being of the individuals.[24] In this thesis I will analyse the ways in which travel can lead an individual from one age to another, from a child into an adult, arguably changing their character. Unlike the Turners, I am interested what consequences these journeys have for the characters that undertake them.

[19] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 25.
[20] Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2-3.
[21] Isabel Davis, 'John Gower's Fear of Flying: Transitional Masculinities in the *Confessio Amantis*,' in *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Nicola F. McDonald and W. M. Ormrod (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 133.
[22] Davis, 'John Gower's Fear of Flying: Transitional Masculinities in the *Confessio Amantis*,' 133.
[23] Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 8-9.
[24] Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 30-31.

Structure

In the first chapter I will first briefly look at the different words the sagas use to talk about masculinity, and what this can tell us about how medieval Icelanders thought of masculinity and how it was constructed. After a short discussion on the laws and adulthood, I will discuss how men prove their physical prowess in games and fights, how their honour and status was affected by travel and how this could affect their marriage prospects. Furthermore, I will focus on how owning property and claiming one's inheritance could affect someone's standing in society. I will also briefly look at how travelling affects a woman's standing. The second chapter will focus on *Njáls saga* and how it subverts some of the narrative patterns that have been discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter also contains a brief discussion on facial hair in connection with status.

Chapter 1 – How to win honour and influence status

As the main focus of this thesis is male adulthood, I will first discuss masculinity and the different ways in which the sagas comment on the prevalent masculine model and the terms which Old Icelandic uses to denote masculinity. I will then focus my discussion on the different criteria for entering adulthood that are mentioned in *Grágás* (Grey Goose), a collection of medieval Icelandic laws. The focal point of this discussion will be the different ways these criteria are represented in the *Íslendingasögur*. The criteria that *Grágás* mentions are physical maturity, the ownership of a property, and administration of justice and the laws.[25] The laws make no explicit mention of marriage with regard to maturity. However, as Ruth Mazo Karras notes, in medieval society 'fatherhood formed a central component of the medieval ideology of manhood.'[26] A man did not necessarily have to be a father to be recognized as an adult, but he had to have to potential to become one, and this meant marriage. In this chapter I will show that this also holds true for medieval Icelandic society. The laws do not specifically mention travelling as a means of attaining maturity, either. However, travelling is very reminiscent of rites of passage, as it includes a separation, a liminal stage and a reincorporation into society. It is then not unimaginable that travelling was a way to achieve maturity. In addition to this, I will discuss how these increase the honour and status of our saga heroes.

Masculinity in the sagas

Medieval Icelandic society and medieval societies in general, were, to a great extent, based on an aggressive and violent masculine model.[27] However, the *Íslendingasögur* do not tend to make overt comments on the masculinity model which was dominant during the times the sagas were set or when they were written. They also do not explicitly state any gendered expectations of male characters. In fact, Old Icelandic does not seem to have a word for 'masculinity', as 'masculinity' is not a medieval term. The earliest known attestation of 'masculinity' in English dates from 1571. There is an isolated attestation of the Old French *masculinité* dating from circa

[25] Nic Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 134.

[26] Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 16.

[27] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, 21; Georges Duby, 'Youth in Aristocratic Society,' in *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 115; Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 21.

1268, and there are British sources from the thirteenth century containing the post-classical Latin *masculinitas*.[28] There are no know cognates for 'masculinity' in Old Icelandic, though there are words that can have a similar semantic function.[29] As is evident in *Kormáks saga*, there are words that can be translated as 'manly'. In *Kormáks saga* when Kormákr has saved Steingerðr from the Vikings, her husband comments '*hann drengiligi hafa eptir sótt*' ('that he pursued her like a man').[30] The word that Þorvaldr uses, *drengiligr* (brave, valiant; generous) is derived from *drengr* (a bold, valiant, chivalrous man; a young unmarried man).[31] The term and its connotations has been hotly debated. Snorri Sturluson gives us the first definition in his *Snorra Edda*:

> *Drengir heita ungir menn búlausir, meðan þeir afla sér fjár eða orðstír, þeir fardrengir, er milli landa fara, þeir konungs drengir er hǫfdingjum þjóna, þeir ok drengir er þjóna ríkum mönnum eða bóndum; drengir heita vaskir menn ok batnandi*.[32]
>
> (Young men that have not settled down, while they are making their fortunes or reputation, are called *drengir*; they are called *fardrengir* who travel from land to land, king's *drengir* who are in the service of rulers, and they are also called *drengir* who are in the service of rich men or landowners. Manly and ambitious men are called *drengir)*.[33]

When Bergþóra is introduced in *Njáls saga* she is described as a '*drengr góðr*' (a fine person).[34] The term *drengr* was thus not exclusively used to denote men. In *Egils saga*, Egill is said to grow melancholy after the death of his brother. His friend Arinbjörn tells him: '*nú þó at þú hafir fengit skaða mikinn um bróður þinn, þá er þat karlmannligt, at bera þat vel[.]*' ('Even though you have suffered a great loss with your brother's death, the manly thing to do is bear it well').[35] The word *karlmannligr* (manly, bold; masculine) is a compound adjective, consisting of *karl* (man), *maðr* (man (irrespective of sex), man, opp. to *kona*, (woman)) and the adjective suffix -*ligr*.[36] Arinbjörn is commenting on the lack of manly behaviour of his friend. Can this be interpreted as the saga commenting on 'proper' manly behaviour? Of course, as is later

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[28] Oxford English Dictionary Online, 'masculinity', revised entry March 2022, accessed 24 May 2022.
[29] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 23.
[30] *Kormáks saga*, 298; Rory McTurk, trans., 'Kormak's Saga,' in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales. Volume I*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 222.
[31] Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 'drengr'.
[32] *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar*, 530.
[33] Anthony Faulkes, trans. and ed., *Edda* (London: J. M. Dent, 1992), 151.
[34] *Njáls saga*, 57; Robert Cook, trans., *Njál's Saga*, (London: Penguin Group, 1997), 36.
[35] *Egils saga*, 148; Bernard Scudder, trans., 'Egil's Saga', in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 92-93.
[36] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 'karlmannligr'; 'karl'; 'maðr'; and '-ligr'.

revealed, though Egill is grieving the loss of his brother, he is suffering from lovesickness and longs for his brother's widow. It used to be a commonly held belief that the *Íslendingasögur* were free from influences from courtly literature, and represented a purely Icelandic society and way of storytelling.[37] This view has been nuanced by recent scholars such as Sif Ríkhardsdóttir and Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir.[38] Brynja Þorgeirsdóttir links *Egils saga* to European courtly literature such as the romances by Chrétien de Troyes and the *lais* by Marie de Fance, in which lovesickness was thought of as an 'occupational hazard' for the aristocracy.[39] She argues that 'Egill's emotional vulnerability appears in a context that does not undermine his masculine status but rather accentuates his place within the aristocratic realm.'[40] In the thirteenth century there was an increase of translated romances and Latin-learned texts due to the Christianization of the North. It is possible that Egill's lovesickness and vulnerability are representative of masculinity being adapted to incorporate literary tropes that were not native to thirteenth century Iceland. In Egill's character we see a combination of the old, violent masculinity and a new, contemporary European masculinity.[41]

In *Víga-Glúms saga* we encounter another example of a saga giving a little glimpse into the medieval mindset about manliness. After Glúmr has killed a berserker Vigfúss offers him the seat next to him: the seat of honour. He says: '*vilda ek þess at bíða, er þú færðir þik með skǫrungsskap í þína ætt[.]*' ('I wanted to wait until you earned your place in the family by some piece of bravery').[42] The word *skǫrungsskapr* means 'nobleness, manliness'.[43] Can we interpret this comment by Vigfúss as a view on masculinity? Is this not a fairly explicit comment on how to prove one's manliness; that is, through violence (in this case killing a berserker).

It would be beyond the scope of this thesis to detail all instances when the saga author uses *drengr* (or other similar terms) or shows other indications of opinions on masculinity. Moreover, as Evans has pointed out, when terms to denote masculinity are used, they are often not expanded on or qualified, leaving us with a very muddled view of masculinity.[44] In

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[37] Else Mundal, *Dating the Sagas: Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), 2.
[38] Ríkhardsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movements of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia*; Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,' 147-163.
[39] Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,' 153-154.
[40] Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,' 159.
[41] See Ríkhardsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movements of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia*; Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 15-22; Connell, *Masculinities*, 44 and 77; Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,' 162.
[42] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 19; John McKinnel, trans., *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox* (Edinburgh: Canongate/UNESCO, 1987), 62.
[43] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 'skǫrungs-skapr'.
[44] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 24.

analysing these texts we must be careful to avoid making overly grand statements about whether something was inherent to Icelandic culture, or if it was merely an adaptation of a foreign motif. As Iceland came into contact with different cultures they also came into contact with different views on masculinity, which would have influenced the way they thought about masculinity. As several scholars have noted, the constructions of masculinities are not static or fixed, and historically subject to change.[45]

Criteria for adulthood

How did boys become men in medieval Iceland? *Grágás* (Grey Goose), a collection of medieval Icelandic laws dating from the late thirteenth century, notes several markers associated with maturing, such as the ownership of property, litigious actions, physical maturity, and responsibility for one's own actions.[46] However, the laws are not very clear when a person entered adulthood. It seems that the ages of twelve and sixteen are significant. Twelve-year-olds were considered physically mature and from the age of sixteen one could claim his inheritance and own property. Twenty was likely considered to be the age at which young men became full adult men, giving young men a time period of four years in which they could grow in maturity.[47] As already stated above, marriage and travel were not included as markers of adulthood in *Grágás*, but will be treated as such in this thesis.

Physical maturity

Physical maturity as a sign of adulthood can be easily understood as entering puberty and developing secondary sexual characteristics, such as beard growth. However, young men had to prove their physical maturity through a series of games or tests. As already stated, medieval Icelandic society had an aggressive masculine model, and so it will come as no surprise that medieval Icelandic adulthood, and particularly male adulthood, depended on demonstrating one's physical strength, prowess and performance.[48] During their childhood boys would often

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[45] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 15-22; Connell, *Masculinities*, 44 and 77; Þorgeirsdóttir, 'Emotions of a Vulnerable Viking: Negotiations of Masculinity in *Egils saga*,' 162.

[46] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' 134.

[47] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structure and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' 134-137; Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 64-65; Oren Falk, 'Boyhood, Saga-Style: From *Manssefni* to *Maðr*,' in *Masculinities in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Gareth Lloyd Evans and Jessica Clare Hancock (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 27.

[48] Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 151; Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structure and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' 146-147; Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 66-70.

engage in *knattleikr* (ball games). These games regularly ended in violence, as in *Egils saga* (Ch. 40), and are thought to have played an important role in socialization and learning more about loyalty, defeat and success. After having played these games, the youth could leave home for Norway and go raiding.[49] In these games their strength and capabilities were tested and they were training for adult life. Scholars that discuss how boys become men in medieval literature note the continued testing and proving of the prowess of young knights throughout their lives.[50]

This continued testing and proving of physical prowess and masculinity is apparent in *Laxdæla saga*, among other sagas. When Kjartan and Bolli have just arrived in Norway, Kjartan engages in a swimming contest with, unbeknownst to him, King Óláfr Tryggvason. After the swimming contest, King Óláfr gives Kjartan a cloak as a sign of respect (Ch. 40). After Kjartan has returned from Norway and has married, he is again said to engage in some games. We are told that he played the strongest players, yet no one could match Kjartan in strength or agility (Ch. 45). In *Finnboga saga* Finnbogi also undergoes tests to prove his masculinity and physical prowess. When he arrives at the court of Earl Hákon, the Earl remarks '*[...] skulu vér hafa gaman ok skemtan at reyna þik í smáleikum.*' ('We'll have some sport and amusement testing you in little games').[51] He is honoured highly partly because of the tests that he undergoes. The Earl then sends him to Byzantium, where Emperor John is reigning, to collect a debt (Ch. 18). Having arrived in Byzantium, Emperor John helps him get the money, but in return the Emperor wants Finnbogi to show him some feats of strength; he needs to prove his prowess. He does so by lifting the throne, after which the Emperor dubs him Finnbogi inn rammi (the Mighty) (Ch. 19-20). When he returns to Norway, he is seated next to Earl Hákon and we are told that he regarded no man more highly (Ch. 20). Back in Iceland Finnbogi continuously proves that he is deserving of his nickname *inn rammi*. Numerous times the author tells his audience about the seemingly insurmountable odds he faces during a fight, but Finnbogi comes out victorious nonetheless (Ch. 27, 31, 35). That does not mean his honour is never called into question, however. Together with his nephew Bergr he is challenged to a duel. Bergr's wife does not want them to fight and threatens to prevent them from going. Finnbogi asks her not to, since '*þá skömm mundu alla ævi uppi vera, ef þeir gengi á heit sín, ok mundi þeim virt til hugleysis*'

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[49] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 66-70; Carolyne Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature,' in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 161-165; Falk, 'Boyhood, Saga-Style: From *Manssefni* to *Maðr,*' 33.

[50] Duby, 'Youth in Aristocratic Society, 113-114; Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 32; Davis, 'John Gower's Fear of Flying: Transitional Masculinities in the *Confessio Amantis*,' 137.

[51] *Finnboga saga*, 283; John Kennedy, trans., 'The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty,' in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales. Volume III*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 238.

('it would be a lifelong disgrace for them if they went back on their agreement and that it would be attributed to cowardice').[52] His protests are to no avail. Finnbogi and Bergr stay at home, but their opponents do go to the meeting place. This results in a great blow to Finnbogi's honour and he himself considers this the worst thing to have ever happened to him (Ch. 34). In this instance Finnbogi has not acted honourably and so he loses respect. Through various fighting exploits and judicial exercises he regains his honour again, and at the end of the saga it is stated that Finnbogi '*þykir verit hafa inn mesti ágætismaðr bæði á afl ok vöxt ok alla kurteisi.*' ('was considered the most excellent of men on account of his strength, his size and his great courtesy').[53]

In *Víga-Glúms saga* Eyjólfr goes to Norway. While in Norway we are told that '*Eyjólfr var fjǫgur sumur í víkingu ok þótti inn mesti garpr ok framgǫngumaðr, fekk gott orð ok mikit fé.*' ('Eyjolf went on viking raids for four summers, and was thought an excellent fellow and a brave man; he acquired a good reputation and a lot of money').[54] Not only does he go on Viking raids, he also fights a berserker, for which he also gains much fame and money (Ch. 4). After Eyjólfr's death his wife Ástriðr and son Glúmr are left behind. Some of their relatives, Sigmundr and Þorkell, take half of the land where the farm is and subsequently start encroaching on the half of Glúmr and Ástriðr (Ch. 5). When Glúmr is fifteen he decides he wants to go abroad: '*sé ek, at þroski minn vill engi verða, en þat má vera, at ek hljóta gæfu af gǫfgum frændum mínum, en ek nenni eigi at þola ágang Sigmundi, en ek sé mik enn vanfæran í mót honum. En lógaðu eigi landinu, þó at þrøngt verði kosti þínum.*' ('I'm not prepared to put up with Sigmund's oppression, but I can see that I'm not able to stand up to him yet. But don't let go of the land, even if your position gets difficult').[55] This could indicate that Glúmr himself sees going abroad as a period during which he will be tested, and during which he will prove himself able to stand up to Sigmundr. He is implicitly stating that travel is a way of preparing oneself for more mature duties. In order to claim the inheritance which is rightfully his, he needs to stand up to Sigmundr, but he is not yet capable of doing so. Travelling is the solution to give him that much needed maturity. Glúmr travels to Norway and stays with Vigfúss, his kinsman. At a gathering with sports, games and entertainment, Glúmr is offered a seat at the outer end of the lower bench and Vigfúss pays him little respect; it is even written that people thought he

[52] *Finnboga saga*, 311; Kennedy, 'The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty,' 254.
[53] *Finnboga saga*, 339; Kennedy, 'The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty,' 270.
[54] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 11; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 53.
[55] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 16; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 58.

was an idiot (Ch. 6).[56] At another feast the berserker Bjǫrn goes around the hall asking whether there is anybody there that thinks they are as tough as he is. The Norwegians all evade his questions, but Glúmr does not and kills Bjǫrn. Vigfúss then offers Glúmr the seat next to him, saying that he first wanted Glúmr to earn his place in the family by some kind of bravery (Ch. 6).[57] After his return to Iceland Glúmr has a feud with Skúta. When he comes across him unexpectedly Glúmr runs away instead of fighting him (Ch. 16). As Skúta was armed and Glúmr was not, this may seem like an understandable decision. Yet when the two men meet again later, he is mocked for being afraid. The message is clear: a 'real' man should have been bold and have fought his opponent. Nevertheless, at the end of the saga it is remarked that for twenty years Glúmr was the greatest chieftain in the district and that for another twenty years nobody was his equal and that he was the hardiest of all fighting men in Iceland (Ch. 27).

Gunnlaugr in *Gunnlaugs saga* fights during his travels abroad as well, in service of the Danish king and he goes raiding with Earl Sigurðr Hlǫdvisson. '*[...] ok reyndisk Gunnlaugr inn hraustasti ok inn vaskasti drengr ok inn harðasti karlmaðr, hvar sem þeir kómu.*' ('Wherever they went, Gunnlaug proved himself to be a very brave and valiant fellow, and very manly').[58] This is indicative of how fighting and raiding can lead to status among men.

Despite this, Anna Kersbergen sees no relation between the overall plot of the sagas and the scenes during the foreign travel in which they fight Vikings, saying that they only serve to increase the prestige of the saga heroes.[59] While I agree with her that one of the purposes is to prove the hero's prowess and thereby increase his prestige, I do think there is a relation between the overall plot of the saga and these scenes. They are part of the coming-of-age montage, if you will. In *Njáls saga* we even see that Gunnarr is unwilling to meet the Earl before he has gone raiding and before he has proven himself (Ch. 31), signifying that to the medieval Icelanders fighting was clearly a way to garner respect and standing.

Snorri Þorgrímsson, or Snorri goði, in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not said to fight while abroad. He is fourteen when he travels to Norway with his foster-brothers. Not much is said about their voyage abroad; they arrive in Norway in autumn and the next summer they return to Iceland.

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[56] Seating order was indicative of respect. Based on the fact that Glúmr is seated at the outer edge of the lower bench, the saga audience knows that Vigfúss is not paying his kinsman the respect he deserves.

[57] It has been argued by Mary Danielli that fighting, and in particular the fighting of bears or berserkers, was part of an initiation ritual to prove one's masculinity. Eyjólfr and Glúmr both fight berserkers, and Finnbogi fights a bear (Ch. 11). See Mary Danielli, 'Initiation Ceremonial from Norse literature,' *Folklore* 56, no. 2 (June 1945): 231.

[58] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 99; Katrina C. Attwood, trans., 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue,' in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders: Including 49 Tales. Volume I*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 329.

[59] Anna Kersbergen, *Litteraire Motieven in de Njála* (Rotterdom: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 1927), 143.

During their stay in Norway they spend time with Erlingr, as their forebears had been friends (Ch. 13). He is not said to engage in any fighting or other testing of his prowess during his stay in Norway. At first glance, this may appear odd. If we follow in Karras' line of reasoning, that different segments of society had different ideas of what it meant to be a man and therefore had different transitional phases, we can start to make sense of this.[60] Though Snorri goði does not necessarily belong to a different segment of society (a lot of the saga heroes become goði's or farmers), I would argue that Snorri adheres to a different, non-hegemonic masculinity model. Snorri does not rely on physical strength and prowess for status and honour, he does not adhere to the dominant, violent masculinity model. Instead, he relies on his wisdom and it is for his wisdom that he is renowned. His apparent lack of fighting while abroad might be a reflection of how Snorri prefers to settle disputes as an adult: through mediation and judicial processes as opposed to with violence. It is also possible that the author of the saga purposively omits the details surrounding his journey. As the audience is unaware of what occurs in Norway, the scene in which he wins back Helgafell, his inheritance, through his wisdom and his riches acquired abroad (Ch. 14), becomes all the more impactful and surprising.

Even though his journey abroad does not contain any overt violence, Snorri goði is certainly is not always depicted as peace-loving. Like so many other men in the *Íslendingasögur* he engages in feuds and killing. In a discussion on who the greatest leader is in the district Þorleifr kimbi, Snorri goði's foster-brother, argues that it is Arnkell (Ch. 37). Arnkell and Snorri goði had had a dispute over a piece of woodland and Arnkell had killed one of Snorri's men. Snorri had brought the case to the þing, but had been unable to win the case and no compensation was paid. Snorri goði had also killed men of Arnkell, but he had always paid compensation (Ch. 30-36). Because of this, Þorleifr argues, Arnkell is the greater leader; Snorri had failed to be able to exact due vengeance. As Þorleifr points out, this affects how people perceive him and his leadership abilities. Not long after this conversation takes place, Snorri goði plans to kill Arnkell. Together with his foster-brother and a few other men, he goes to meet Arnkell and they kill him (Ch. 37). The saga also narrates how he drives away Vikings (Ch. 62). So even though he does not give any indications of physical or martial prowess during his travels, he does possess it. However, he does not rely on it for gaining status or honour.

[60] Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 11.

Travelling abroad

Lars Lönnroth points out in his discussion of *Njáls saga* that the *Njála* consists of narrative conventions established long before the saga was written.[61] He discusses, among other things, the Travel Pattern:

> The hero leaves Iceland to win fame and is presented at the Norwegian Court, where he is honored by the King or the earl. His valor is tested at this visit and/or in encounters with vikings of the Berserk type, and he finally passes all heroic tests and returns safely and with honor to Iceland. […] Schematically, the Travel Pattern in *Njála* may be represented as follows: 1. Departure (*Útanferð*). 2. A series of tests, including court visit and viking adventures. 3. Homecoming (*Útkoma*).[62]

He elaborates by saying that the *útanferð* consists of four things: the hero is at home with his people; a Norwegian visitor makes an offer; a wise counsellor advises the hero to go; and lastly, the hero goes to Norway. The *tests* consist of a court visit, where the hero is honoured and receives gifts and maybe even a possibility of a noble marriage, and actual tests, be that in fighting or games. The *útkoma* has two parts: the hero takes leave of his benefactor and he returns to his people.[63] Lönnroth is talking specifically about the *Njála*; however, the Travel Pattern, with occasional minor variants, occurs in many other sagas as well. There is a clear overlap between the schematic Travel Pattern and the three stages of a rite of passage as outlined by Van Gennep: rites of separation (*útanferð*), transition rites (*tests*) and rites of incorporation (*útkoma*). Unlike Van Gennep's rites of passage, however, the journeys abroad of young Icelandic men are not accompanied by rituals that symbolically mark their transition into adulthood.

This pattern is evident in sagas such as *Víga-Glúms saga*, in which Eyjólfr leaves home, engages in several fights, returns home and settles down. In the same saga Glúmr leaves Iceland and proves his physical prowess, upon which he returns home and eventually settles down. Finnbogi's travels, like Kjartan's, follow a similar pattern. During his wedding feast Kjartan entertains his guests with stories from his travels abroad and '*þótti mǫnnum þar mikils um þat vert, hversu mikil efni þar váru til seld,*' ('[p]eople were very impressed by how much he had to tell,' and he gains much respect on account of the feast').[64] Similarly it is said that Bolli

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[61] Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*, 68-69.
[62] Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*, 71.
[63] Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction*, 74-75.
[64] *Laxdæla saga*, 138; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 362.

'*hafði mikinn sóma fengit í ferð þessi; þótti ǫllum frændum hans ok kunningjum mikils um vert hans vaskleik. Bolli hafði ok mikit fé út haft*' ('had earned himself a great deal of respect as a result of his journey. All of his kinsmen and acquaintances valued his strength and courage highly. Bolli had also made a large profit from his voyage').[65] This is rather curious, as Bolli does not seem to do anything extraordinary while abroad. He does not really engage in any fights or other tests, and yet he receives a lot of honour upon his return. Moreover, while still in Norway he and Kjartan are thought of as highly capable men (Ch. 40), though they have done seemingly nothing to warrant these opinions of them. Nevertheless, both men earn respect on account of their journeys. It seems that the mere act of having travelled abroad is enough to rise in honour and status.[66]

If we regard instances of foreign travel as more than just literary motifs and look for an historical reason for young men to leave their homes behind, we find that medieval societies often thought of young men as a nuisance, with the adolescents being wild and unruly.[67] If these unruly youths left their society behind, it would minimize the disruptive effects that they could have upon settled civilization. This is reflected in the *Íslendingasögur*, in which young men leave their society behind to fight abroad and upon their return home settle down and get married. It is remarkable then, that a wild character such as Egill is initially denied to travel abroad (Ch. 40). When Egill is introduced we are told '*[...] hann var brátt málugr ok orðvíssæ heldr var hann illr viðreignar, er hann var í leikum með ǫðrum ungmennum.*' ('He became talkative at an early age and had a gift for words, but tended to be difficult to deal with in his games with other children').[68] When Egill is twelve or thirteen, Þórólfr, his brother, is preparing to set sail and Egill wants to join him. When he asks his brother whether he can join him, Þórólfr replies: '*ef faðir þinn þykkisk eigi mega um þik tœla hér í hýbýlum sínum, þá ber ek eigi traust til þess at hafa þik útanlendis með mér, því at þér mun þat ekki hlýða, at hafa þar slíkt skaplyndi sem hér.´*' ('If your own father doesn't feel he can manage you in his house, I can't feel confident about taking you abroad with me, because you won't get away with acting there the way you do here').[69] It is interesting that Egill, who is continuously described as a difficult character, is at first discouraged by his brother to go abroad on account of his behaviour. Þórólfr

[65] *Laxdæla saga*, 128; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 354.
[66] For a more detailed discussion on the 'discrepancy between the image and the reality' of Kjartan, see Robert Cook, 'Women and Men in Laxdæla Saga,' *Skáldskaparmál* 2 (1992): 34-59.
[67] Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinities in Late Medieval Europe*, 14; Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature,' 152; Kim R. McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga*, and *Fíana*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland,' *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter 1986): 14-15.
[68] *Egils saga*, 80; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 51.
[69] *Egils saga*, 102; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 64.

does not seems to realize that letting a wild youth out of civilized society might be beneficial for both parties. On the other hand, he might simply be an older brother unwilling to look after his troublesome little brother. However, Egill is not the only character who initially is not allowed to travel abroad due to his bad behaviour. Gunnlaugr in *Gunnlaugs saga* is twelve when he first expresses his desire to travel abroad. His father will not let him go, however, as he thinks that Gunnlaugr would not be thought of highly if he could not act as he was accustomed to at home (Ch. 4). When he is eighteen he again asks his father for permission to travel abroad, this time gaining his permission and support to do so, as his behaviour has improved (Ch. 5).

As already stated above, travelling follows the same patterns as a rite of passage and can thus be seen as a way of transitioning from childhood into adulthood. It is during these travels that a lot of testing and proving of one's physical prowess takes place. In Icelandic literature unpromising, lethargic youths who often would rather stay at home by the hearth than go out travelling, are called *kolbítr*, 'coal-biters'.[70] As Georges Duby states: 'a long stay at home disgraces a young man'.[71] Glúmr, after the death of his father Eyjólfr, does not help on the farm and was thought to be backwards in his development (Ch. 5). When he is fifteen he travels abroad, and proves his worth to his kinsman Vigfúss, gaining much respect (Ch. 6). Back in Iceland it is remarked that Glúmr still has the same nature as before, with Sigmundr (one of his kinsmen) even remarking that '*[...] slíkr glópaldi þykkir oss þú nú sem þá er þú fórt útan*.' ('[…] to us you seem the same sort of idiot now as when you went abroad').[72] If travelling and being tested abroad is part of the transition rite, one would expect a difference in behaviour in Iceland and Norway. Afterall, supposedly the youth has been transformed into a man and a change in behaviour would mark this clearly. As a child Glúmr is depicted as lazy. He proves his manliness in Norway, but back at home in Iceland it is remarked that he seems unchanged in character. It is only after he wins a case at the Alþing that he gains respect in Iceland (9-10). In a sense Glúmr has to prove his manhood and adulthood twice in the saga; once in Norway and once in Iceland. It seems that although usually the Icelanders accept the testing of one's abilities abroad, in this instance they do not. Could this be because of a changing society in Iceland, and with it changing ideals of masculinity? Was Glúmr trying to achieve the violent, aggressive ideal of manhood prominent during the Viking Age, while his society was changing

[70] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Viking Childhood,' in *Childhood in History*, ed. Reidar Aasgaard and Cornelia Horn, with Oana Maria Cojocaru (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 291-292.
[71] Duby, 'Youth in Aristocratic Society,' 117.
[72] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 26; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 66.

to an agricultural and more civil society, and with it a changed ideal of manhood, in which a man would conquer in a court of law instead of a battlefield?[73]

In *Egils saga* we do encounter a change in behaviour after extensive travelling abroad. Egill travels abroad several times, and it is said of him that '*[e]kki var Egill íhlutunarsamr um mál manna ok ótilleitinn við flesta menn, þá er hann var hér á landi.*' ('Egil was not the type to interfere in other people's affairs, and generally did not act aggressively in Iceland').[74] After he has definitively settled down in Iceland, it is noted that he did not duel anyone or was involved in any other disputes (Ch. 80). Here then is a change in character as a result of travelling abroad and a clear distinction between a person's behaviour abroad and at home. At home in Iceland Egill is said to behave in a non-aggressive manner; something that cannot be said of his behaviour abroad. Though Egill is quite violent during his childhood, in adulthood he is said to only fight while abroad. Travelling abroad and maturing bring about a change in character in Egill, evidenced by his lack of violence in Iceland after adolescence.

Marriage

As I have alluded to several times, when the saga hero returns from his journeys abroad, he settles down. Settling down usually takes the shape of ownership of one's own property and marriage. As stated earlier, marriage was a way of legally fathering children, which was an important component of manhood in medieval times. Scholars have pointed out that in a chivalric society a youth stopped being regarded as a youth when he had put down roots and had become the head of a household. As the head of a household, his roaming days are, in theory, over.[75] Several scholars have argued that marriage was the culminating factor of travel, and that a successful ending to a voyage would make a man a more desirable match.[76]

That travel could influence marriage is evident in the betrothal between Óláfr pái and Þorgerðr in *Laxdæla saga* (Ch. 23). Óláfr is the son of Melkorka, an Irish princess who was brought to Iceland as a slave. He wants to marry Þorgerðr. When she is asked whether she wants to marry him she replies that she does not want to marry '*ambáttarsyni*' (some slave-girl's son).[77] She remains unconvinced, even when it is pointed out to her that he is the grandson of

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[73] Larrington, 'Awkard Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature,' 153.
[74] *Egils saga*, 211; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga', 129.
[75] Duby, 'Youth in Aristocratic Society', 113; Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, 16.
[76] Constance B. Hieatt, 'Hrútr's Voyage to Norway and the Structure of Njála,' in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland Publishers, 1989), 272-279; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 186.
[77] *Laxdæla saga*, 63; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 313.

a king. Óláfr then meets her, and when he sits down next to her, she remarks: '*„Þat muntu hugsa, at þú munt þykkjask hafa gǫrt meiri þoranraun en tala við konur.´´*' ('You must think you've done more dangerous things in your life than talk to women').[78] This is presumably a reference to his travels abroad. They spend the rest of the day talking to each other, though the saga does not tell us what about. It is not a stretch of the imagination to say that he would have told her about his voyages. After this, the two become betrothed. Given how dismissive she was before their one-on-one conversation and his presumed telling her about his daring travels, I think it is likely that she would have refused his proposal had he not travelled abroad. Similarly, Constance B. Hieatt argues that Gunnarr's travels in *Njáls saga* lend him a reputation of an accomplished hero and that his marriage to Hallgerðr 'is a direct result of the voyage.'[79] In fact, after Gunnarr has fought Vikings he goes to Denmark and meets King Harald Gormsson. He invites Gunnarr and gives him a seat next to himself, which is a great sign of respect. The King also offers to give him a wife and some lands if Gunnarr wants to settle down there, but Gunnarr declines and states that he wants to return to Iceland first (Ch. 31), where he marries Hallgerðr. This is another clear example of how travel and fighting can aid in acquiring good marriage prospects. In the light of these episodes, we can therefore say that foreign travel and the often dangerous escapades of these voyages were of great importance in the matter of marriage proposals.

However, not all of the saga heroes' betrothals take place after their travels abroad. Sometimes the betrothal took place before their voyages. In *Gunnlaugs saga* Gunnlaugr is set to go abroad when he asks for Helga's hand in marriage (Ch. 5). Her father is not immediately enthusiastic, but ultimately agrees: '*[...] þá skal Helga vera heitkona Gunnlaugs, en eigi festarkona, ok bíða þrjá vetr; en Gunnlaug skal fara útan ok skapa sik eptir góðra manna siðum.*' ('[…] Helga shall be promised to Gunnlaug, but not formally betrothed to him, and she shall wait three years for him. And Gunnlaug must go abroad and follow the example of good men').[80] In saying that Gunnlaugr should 'follow the example of good men' the author seems to acknowledge that having travelled was beneficial in a marriage proposal. Also of importance is the fact that Helga shall wait for three years. Kersbergen has discussed the three-year delay in marriage and has suggested that it might go back to a custom from the Viking Age.[81] Theodore M. Andersson has argued that this three-year delay of the marriage is a foreboding

[78] *Laxdæla saga*, 65; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 314.
[79] Hieatt, 'Hrútr's Voyage to Norway and the Structure of *Njála*,' 275.
[80] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 67-68; Attwood, 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue,' 313.
[81] Kersbergen, *Litteraire Motieven in de* Njála, 110.

sign, saying that a 'betrothal prolonged by a voyage abroad can only lead to disaster.'[82] Gunnlaugr sets sail and during his travels he meets Hrafn, another Icelander, with whom he becomes good friends. The friendship is short-lived, however, and they part on bad terms (Ch. 9). Hrafn returns to Iceland and at the Alþing he asks for the hand of Helga. Þorsteinn, Helga's father, makes him wait until the three years are over, and then it is decided that Helga should marry Hrafn. Helga is not happy with this arrangement (Ch. 9). Because of various reasons Gunnlaugr's journey home and to Borg is delayed and before he arrives, Helga and Hrafn are already married. Unhappy with this situation, Gunnlaugr challenges Hrafn to a duel at the next þing (Ch. 10-11). In the duel Hrafn loses his weapon and Gunnlaugr gets wounded, leaving the matter unresolved. Not long after that, Hrafn suggests that he and Gunnlaugr both travel to Norway where they can fight another duel, as duelling had been outlawed in Iceland. Gunnlaugr happily agrees with this (Ch. 11). In Norway the adversaries meet each other, and a fight breaks out. In the fight Hrafn tricks Gunnlaugr, causing him a serious and ultimately deadly headwound. '*Þá mælti Gunnlaugr: „Illa sveiktu mik nú, ok ódrengiliga fór þér, þar sem ek trúða þér."*' (''Now you have cruelly deceived me,' Gunnlaug said, 'and you have behaved in an unmanly way, since I trusted you'').[83] As we can see, for Gunnlaugr the three year delay in marriage has led to his betrothed marrying another man, and arguably to his own death – a foreboding sign, indeed.

Similarly, in *Laxdæla saga* Kjartan and Guðrún plan to get married, but before they get officially betrothed, Kjartan arranges to go abroad. When Kjartan tells Guðrún of his plans to travel abroad she expresses her desire to go with him. Kjartan tells her that this is impossible. Instead he asks her to wait for him for three years. Guðrún does not promise this and they part in disagreement (Ch. 40). While Kjartan is forced to stay behind in Norway as a hostage, his friend and foster-brother Bolli is allowed to travel home to Iceland (Ch. 41). Guðrún asks Bolli after Kjartan and he heavily implies, if not outright says, that there is no point in waiting for him, as he is enjoying the company of the king's sister, Ingibjǫrg (Ch. 42). When Bolli then asks her how she feels about marrying him, she replies '*[...] engum manni mun ek giptask, meðan ek spyr Kjartan á lífi*.' ('I'll marry no man as long as I know Kjartan is still alive').[84] Just like Helga in *Gunnlaugs saga*, Guðrún initially intends to remain true to her betrothal to Kjartan. Guðrún's family attempt to convince her to marry Bolli, as they deem it an honour to have a man as Bolli in their family, and Guðrún reluctantly agrees (Ch. 43). After Iceland has

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[82] Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*, 186.
[83] *Gunnlaugs saga*, 102; Attwood, 'The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue,' 331.
[84] *Laxdæla saga*, 128; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 354.

been converted to Christianity, Kjartan is allowed to travel home. Before he departs, however, he is given a headdress by Ingibjǫrg, to give to Guðrún as a wedding present (Ch. 43). When Kjartan learns that Guðrún is married, he shows no emotion. The text reads: '*Kjartan segir, at eigi myndi mikit undir, hverja hann ætti, en lézk engrar skyldu lengi vánbiðill vera; - „sé ek, at þessi búnaðr berr þér vel, ok er sannligt, at þú verðir mín kona.´´*' ('Kjartan said it mattered little what woman he married, but implied that he would not remain a suitor for long').[85] Shortly after his return he sees Hrefna wearing the headdress, upon which he decides that he will marry her (Ch. 44). The relationship between Bolli and Kjartan has significantly cooled down as a result of Bolli marrying Kjartan's betrothed. When they are reunited for the first time Bolli tries to give Kjartan some horses, seemingly in an attempt to pacify him after having married his loved one (Ch. 45). The act of giving gifts occurs frequently in the Travel Pattern. A foreign King or Earl bestows the Icelander with a precious gift upon their departure. The act of gift giving was indicative of the status and honour of both the giver and the recipient.[86] The horses here serve as a peace-offering, one that Kjartan refuses to accept. In refusing Bolli's fine gifts, Kjartan is also denying him his honour and respect and this can be read as an insult. Not long after this the precious items given by the Norwegian King to Kjartan are stolen, presumably by Bolli and his men (Ch. 46). The argument escalates and results in the killing of Kjartan by once his closest friend Bolli. Although his wife apparently does not mind the murder, Bolli immediately regrets his actions (Ch. 49). Again we see how the delay in marriage leads to the bride-to-be marrying another man, conflict, and ultimately death. In contrast to the disastrous effects Kjartan's travels have had on his betrothal, Bolli's travels have a positive effect on his marriage prospects. His honour and status due to his travels lead Guðrún's family to convince her to marry him. Interestingly, both men seem to have marriage in their minds upon their arrival in Iceland. Shortly after their arrival, Bolli proposes to Guðrún and Kjartan indicates that he does not intend to remain unmarried for long. I believe this is a reflection of the sentiment that travel will make a man more eligible.

Alternatively, there are also saga characters who get married whilst they are abroad, such as Egill in *Egils saga*. Egill travels abroad together with his brother Þórólfr, who gets married. After Þórólfr dies in a fight in the service of the English king Aðalsteinn, Egill returns to Norway where he marries his widow, Ásgerðr (Ch. 55-56). He takes her back home to

[85] *Laxdæla saga*, 133; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 358.

[86] Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 45, 49 and 51; Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 40-42; Jón Viðar Sigurðson, *Viking Friendship: The Social Bond in Iceland and Norway, c. 900-1300* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 18-22.

Iceland. After a few years in Iceland, he decides to travel abroad once again, taking his wife with him (Ch. 57). This is not the last time that Egill will leave Iceland behind, but Ásgerðr does not join him on any more of his journeys, and stays behind to look after their farm and family. In addition, *Víga-Glúms saga* contains a marriage that happens abroad as well: the marriage of Eyjólfr and Ástriðr (Ch. 4). While he is in Norway he proves his physical strength and gains respect on account of it. He asks for the hand of Ástriðr and he takes his new bride back home to Iceland. Though he is still on his travels, his exploits while travelling have garnered enough respect for him to aid him in his marriage pursuits. In *Finnboga saga* we encounter another marriage that takes place abroad. Shortly after his arrival in Norway, Finnbogi sets out to meet Earl Hákon, accompanied by Álfr. Álfr was a man of bad character and tries to kill Finnbogi, but Finnbogi manages to kill him first (Ch. 14). He meets Álfr's family and takes his daughter Ragnhildr with him to meet Earl Hákon (Ch. 14). The Earl and Álfr are related to each other through marriage. The Earl welcomes Finnbogi as his follower and he is honoured highly (Ch. 15). When he asks Finnbogi to travel to Byzantium to collect a debt for him, Finnbogi agrees to do this, on the condition that the Earl does not send Ragnhildr home or give her away in marriage (Ch. 18). When he returns form Byzantium, Finnbogi asks Hákon to help him in asking Ragnhildr for her hand in marriage. His proposal is successful and not long after their marriage Finnbogi returns to Iceland with his new bride (Ch. 21). '*Síðan sitr hann heima á Eyri með sæmd ok virðing í góðu yfirlæti*.' ('[…] and he then remained at home in Eyri, honoured and highly esteemed').[87] Not only is being thought of as an honourable man due to travel helpful in getting married, but a successful marriage in itself could lead to an increase in esteem. Likewise, the marriage between Glúmr and Halldóra in *Víga-Glúms saga* results in more esteem: '*[...] er hans ráð enn virðuligra en áðr*.' ('[…] his position was even more respected than before').[88]

Alternatively, travel does not necessarily have to lead to marriage, or impact a marriage. As will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, the marriages in *Njáls saga* do not appear to be influenced by travel. What is more, in *Kormáks saga* there is a betrothal and a voyage, but it does not play out as one might expect. Kormákr is in love with Steingerðr, and there is a mutual affection. A marriage between Kormákr and Steingerðr is arranged but as a result of a spell Kormákr's feelings cool down and he does not attend his own wedding, which was thought of as dishonourable (Ch. 6). Steingerðr marries Bersi instead. When news of this reaches

[87] *Finnboga saga*, 291; Kennedy, 'The Saga of Finnbogi the Mighty,' 243.
[88] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 35; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 73.

Kormákr, he is not pleased and tries to win her back, but does not succeed in doing so (Ch. 7-8). Steingerðr divorces Bersi (Ch. 13) and shortly after she gets betrothed to Þorvaldr (Ch. 17). Kormákr sets sail for Norway, where he is held in high honour and from where he goes raiding. Throughout his journey it is clear that Steingerðr is never far from his mind (Ch. 18). Immediately upon his return to Iceland, he meets Steingerðr and tries to win her back again, but she resists him (Ch. 19). Kormákr then travels to Norway again where he is welcomed warmly by the king (Ch. 24). Steingerðr persuades her husband to go to Norway as well and while at sea they are attacked by Vikings. Kormákr comes to their aid (Ch. 24). When Þorvaldr and Steingerðr travel to Denmark they are once again attacked by Vikings and Steingerðr is taken away (Ch. 26). Kormákr goes after her and rescues her, after which her husband allows her to go with Kormákr '*sagði hann drengiligi hafa eptir sótt.*' ('saying that he pursued her like a man').[89] Steingerðr refuses, however, and even Kormákr asks her to go with her husband. After this incident Steingerðr and Þorvaldr return to Iceland and Kormákr continues his raiding in the British Isles. During one of these raids he is fatally wounded and he dies (Ch. 27). From this, it can be inferred that travel and valiant exploits could influence marriage pursuits. Steingerðr's husband gives his wife permission to be with Kormákr after he has saved them from Vikings for the second time. However, at this point both Kormákr and Steingerðr decide it is better for them to be apart.

What is more, the issue of marriage is also present in other Icelandic literature, such as the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas). In *Ragnars Saga Loðbrókar* (The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok), the titular hero Ragnar gathers some ships and becomes a warrior. At the age of fifteen he kills a dragon. Shortly after that he marries the Earl's daughter and he takes his bride home. She, however, dies and in grief Ragnar leaves his kingdom behind and returns to raiding. In Norway he meets Kraka. He takes her back home and marries her. This illustrates that young men journeying abroad to fight and then returning either with a bride, or ready to take a bride, is not exclusive to the *Íslendingasögur* in medieval Icelandic literature.

Inheritance and owning property

As briefly mentioned above, part of entering into adulthood according to the laws was the ownership of property. One way of becoming an owner of property was through inheritance. Let us take a closer look at how this is portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur*.

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[89] *Kormáks saga*, 298; McTurk, 'Kormak's Saga,' 222.

Perhaps the clearest reflection of claiming one's inheritance occurs in *Víga-Glúms saga*, with the character of Eyjólfr. Eyjólfr travels to Norway, goes on Viking raids, fights a berserker and acquires a good reputation, he marries and returns home. Back in Iceland Eyjólfr learns that his father has died and so he takes over his father's farm and chieftaincy (Ch. 2-5). Unlike his father's, Glúmr's story of coming into his inheritance is not as simple. When Eyjólfr dies, Glúmr is still too young to inherit his father's property. The laws state that a young man had to be sixteen to be able to claim his inheritance,[90] and Glúmr is only fifteen when he travels abroad. While Glúmr is unable to claim his inheritance, some of his kinsmen, Sigmundr and Þorkell, try to claim the property (Ch. 5). Before he can stand up to his relatives, Glúmr travels to Norway, where he meets another kinsman of his and where he proves his strength and courage. His kinsman, Vigfúss, offers him the succession of his power and position in recognition of his bravery (Ch. 6). Due to his valour Glúmr is now offered a second inheritance, one in Norway. Glúmr declines Vigfúss' offer, however, saying that he would first like to return to Iceland to make sure that his inheritance there would not be acquired by someone else. He returns to Iceland where he kills Sigmundr (Ch. 8). This leads to a trial at the Alþing. Glúmr wins the case and brings forward a case against Þorkell, on the basis of attempting to defraud him of his own property. He wins this case and Þorkell is forced to sell his half of the land back to Glúmr (Ch. 9). Claiming his inheritance and his victory at the Alþing lead to an increase in prestige for Glúmr.

Similarly, *Eyrbyggja saga* has a scene dealing with a young man claiming his rightful inheritance from a kinsman who would impinge on it. When Snorri goði and his foster-brothers return to Iceland it is remarked upon their arrival that the people noticed a great difference between the outfits of Þorleifr kimbi (one of his foster-brothers) and Snorri (Ch. 13). Þorleifr is said to have worn clothes of the finest quality, having spent most of his money on the outfit. He is carrying an ornamented sword, an inlaid spear and a gilded shield. His fine horse is carrying a painted saddle. In short, Þorleifr is very much showing off his wealth. Snorri, on the other hand, is said to have been wearing a black cloak. Though his horse is a fine mare, the saddle is described as old and his weapons are equally unimpressive. Because of this, Snorri is made fun of, with his own foster-father, Bǫrkr, assuming he has lost all of his money. At the next þing, Snorri demands his inheritance from Bǫrkr; he wants to inherit Helgafell (Ch. 14). Bǫrkr replies that he can buy it off him, confident in thinking that Snorri does not have enough money. Snorri, however, has more than enough to buy Helgafell. Then the saga reads

[90] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' 135.

> *Snorri Þorgrímsson gerði bú at Helgafelli, of var móðir hans fyrir innan stokk. Már Hallvarðsson, fǫðurbróðir Snorra, rézk þangat með mart búfé ok tók forráð fyrir búi Snorra; hafði hann þá it mesta rausnarbú ok fjǫlmennt. [...] Hann varðveitti þá hof; var hann þá kallaðr Snorri goði.*
>
> (Snorri Thorgrimsson began farming at Helgafell, with his mother in charge of the household. Mar Hallvardsson, his uncle, moved in with ample livestock and became the overseer. Snorri was soon running his farm in fine style, with plenty of men to follow him. […] As Snorri was now in charge of the temple, he was Snorri the Priest).[91]

Here we can clearly see the importance of coming into one's inheritance and having your own property. Furthermore, it can be argued that Snorri goði and his mother had a shared headship of the household. As William Ian Miller has pointed out, it was possible for women to be head of the household, or share the headship of the household. A shared headship of a household was not uncommon, and both parties shared in the duties and responsibilities of maintaining a farm. Though it was more common to share a household between brothers, there are also indications of fathers and sons sharing a headship, or in this case mother and son.[92]

Likewise, in *Egils saga* Egill shares the head of the household with his father. After his marriage and return to Iceland the saga states that '*Egill dvalðisk þá með Skalla-Grími nǫkkura vetr; tók hann til fjárforráða ok búsumsýslu engu miðr Skalla-Grími.*' ('Egil stayed with Skallagrim for several winters, and looked after the property and ran the farm just as much as Skallagrim did').[93] Skalla-Grímr is still very much alive, and both men share the duties and responsibilities of running a farm. However, the older and more fragile Skalla-Grímr grows, the more charge Egill takes of his property and the maintenance of the farm: '*Skalla-Grímr gerðisk þá gamall ok hrumr af elli; tók Egill þá til fjárforráða ok bús varðveizlu.*' ('By this time Skallagrim was old and fragile with age, so Egil took charge of the property and maintaining the farm').[94] After Skalla-Grímr dies the texts reads: '*Egill tók þar við arfi, lǫndum of lausum aurum; réð hann þá fyrir búi.*' ('Egil inherited his father's lands and valuables').[95] After having shared the head of the household, Egill inherits his father's farm after his death. The saga does

[91] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 26-27; Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Eyrbyggja Saga* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989), 44-45.
[92] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 119-120.
[93] *Egils saga*, 151; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 94.
[94] *Egils saga*, 173; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 107.
[95] *Egils saga*, 175; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 108.

not remark whether or not Egill gains in honour by doing so; it merely states that he took charge of the property.

The administration of justice and the laws

As previously stated, men also had to administrate justice and the laws. In *Víga-Glúms saga* Glúmr is called to judge the case of Hallvarðr. Hallvarðr is Glúmr's freedman and the foster-father of his son Vigfúss. He is accused of stealing sheep. When Vigfúss realises that his father is intending on proclaiming Hallvarðr guilty, he threatens that he will make Glúmr pay dearly for that (Ch. 17-18). In response to that, Glúmr dismisses the case and acquits Hallvarðr, '*ok fekk af óvirðing*' ('and was discredited by doing so').[96] Glúmr is essentially caught between two dictates of masculinity: being kind to your kinsmen, and the administration of justice. If he acts honourably and judges Hallvarðr to be guilty, he will greatly upset his son; if he appeases his son, he will lose honour. He chooses his son and suffers a disgrace on account of it. Evans writes: '[b]oth violent altercation and the law into which such violent conflict is sublimated are thus means by which men are able to gain – and liable to lose – masculine status.'[97] Violence and the law were important aspects of society in medieval Iceland. However, violence was often used to protect one's family. Being able to protect and provide for one's family were highly valued attributes, and Glúmr decides he values his relationship with his son more highly than the status he can gain with litigious pursuits. Glúmr is esteemed for his physical feats, but not for his judicial exploits.

In contrast, Snorri goði is renowned for his wisdom and his legal advice. So much so, in fact, that it is part of his name. Though *goði* seems to have originally carried the meaning of priest, over time the functions of a *goði* seem to have secularised, and denoted a local chieftain who had legal and administrative responsibilities. However, the saga does state that he was in charge of the temple, so it is not entirely clear which meaning, religious or secular, *goði* has here. *Eyrbyggja saga* tells us about Snorri that he '*var vitr maðr ok forspár um marga hluti, langrækr ok heiptúðigr, heilráðr vinum sínum, en óvinir hans þóttusk heldr kulða af kenna ráðum hans.*' ('was a very shrewd man with unusual foresight, a long memory, and a taste for vengeance. To his friends he gave good counsel, but his enemies learned to fear the advice he gave').[98] Even *Njáls saga* states that '*Snorri var vitrastr maðr kallaðr á Íslandi, þeira er eigi*

[96] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 60; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 94

[97] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, 49.

[98] *Eyrbyggja saga*, 26; Pálsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 44-45

váru forspáir' ('Snorri was called the wisest of the men in Iceland who could not foretell the future').[99] Consequently, we can say that Snorri goði derives much of his honour and status from being his skills in the administrating of justice and the laws department.

Another character who deals with the administration of the law is Oddr in *Bandamanna saga*. Oddr has acquired wealth and reputation for himself by fishing, trading, and even overseas trading journeys (Ch. 1). One winter Oddr is urged by his friends to settle down; he buys a piece of land and starts farming, also excelling at that. It is said that Oddr now had no equal in the country (Ch. 2). After a while he wants to travel abroad again, and so he puts Óspakr in charge of his goðorð (Ch. 3). When Oddr returns, Óspakr is hesitant in handing back the goðorð to Oddr and in a subsequent argument over some lost sheep Óspakr kills one of Oddr's kinsmen (Ch. 4). Oddr takes this case to the Alþing, but loses due to a legal error made because of his inexperience (Ch. 5). His father Ófeigr steps in and bribes the judges. He ultimately wins the case, resulting in the outlawing of Óspakr (Ch. 6). Some men wanted to take revenge, but again Ófeigr steps in during the Alþing and manages to come to an agreement. He cannot convince the men to settle outside of the court, but they no longer press for outlawing and suffice with self-judgement and the betrothal between Oddr and one of their daughters (Ch. 7-10). Oddr has an apparent inability to administrate justice and the laws. Though the saga author does not overtly judge him for this, it transpires that Oddr's adversaries decided to let the case collapse because they wanted to teach him a lesson in humility. His father echoes this sentiment: '*þú þóttisk þér œrinn einn ok vildir engn mann at spyrja[.]*' ('[…] you thought yourself all-sufficient and wouldn't ask anyone's advice').[100] Eventually Oddr learns to take his father's advice and he lets his father settle his court cases. Unlike we might expect, Oddr is not criticised for his lack of skills in the legal department. He is criticised for thinking himself better than others and his refusal to ask for or accept help. Once he resolves these problems, we learn that people thought of him as an outstanding man.

Alternatively, a character that is seemingly not involved in any legal matters after he has finally and definitively settled down in Iceland, is Egill. Though he is involved in a lot of feuds during his time abroad, he does not engage in fighting, be that physical or legal, while he is in Iceland. This does not seem to affect his status.

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[99] *Njáls saga*, 287; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 192.

[100] *Bandamanna saga*, 320; Ruth C. Ellison, trans., 'The Saga of the Confederates,' in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 474.

Travelling women

As we have already seen a few times, women travelling overseas was not entirely uncommon. They would travel from Norway to Iceland with their new husbands, or occasionally travel with their husbands to settle an inheritance dispute. Historically, women travelling overseas cannot have been entirely uncommon for Icelanders, either. During the Settlement Age many women must have come from Norway or the British Isles to Iceland. In fact, there are some instances in the literature where this is mentioned. *Laxdœla saga* recounts the story of Unnr in djúpúðga (the Deep-minded) who is a female settler (Ch. 1-7). Similarly, *Njáls saga* writes about Njáll's mother: '*Móðir Njáls hét Ásgerðr ok var dóttir Áskels hersis ins ómálga; hon hafði komit út hingat til Íslands ok numit land fyrir austan Markarfljót, milli Ǫldusteins ok Seljalandsmúla.*' 'Njal's mother was Asgerd, the daughter of the Norwegian hersir Askel the Silent; she had come out to Iceland and settled to the east of the Markarfljot river, between Oldustein and Seljalandsmuli.'[101] In general the women in medieval literature are quite passive figures; they are usually the object of the action, rather than the subject. This is not true of medieval Icelandic literature. The women can take on powerful, active roles. Moreover, masculinity, and especially aggressive masculinity, was so dominant that it was thought to be a virtue for a woman to conform to it.[102]

As briefly mentioned above, in *Laxdœla saga* we meet Unnr in djúpúðga (Ch. 1-7). She and her family leave Norway as a result of King Haraldr inn hárfagri (Fair-hair). Though the introduction of the saga states that she is married to Óláfr hvíti (the White) Ingjaldsson, he is not mentioned any further in this saga, but in *Eiríks saga rauða* it is mentioned that he is killed in battle in Ireland (Ch. 1). After her husband's death she travels to Scotland together with her father and son. Both men die there. This leaves her without male kinsmen in Scotland, and so she decides to leave. The author writes: '*af því marka, at hon var mikit afbragð annarra kvenna.*' ('It shows what an exceptional woman Unn was').[103] She brings her family to Iceland, throws high-seat pillars in the sea and settles where they wash ashore, she arranges marriages for her grandchildren, she frees slaves, gives away pieces of land and arranges grand wedding feasts, and is ultimately buried in a ship with treasure which is subsequently placed in a mound. All of these things are commonly associated with patriarchs. It is clear then that Unnr is the head of the family, the *mater familias*. At the end of her life the author comments several times on Unnr's dignity (Ch. 7). Unnr is a woman who takes up a traditionally more masculine role

[101] *Njáls saga*, 55-56; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 35.
[102] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, 21.
[103] *Laxdœla saga*, 7; Kunz, 'The Saga of the People of Laxardal,' 278.

and is well-respected for it. Her epithet is another sign of this; *in djúpúðga* (the Deep-minded) signals her portrayal as a wise woman. Unnr (or Auðr, as she is also known) is not only a character in *Laxdæla saga*. She also features in *Njáls saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Eiríks saga rauða*, and *Grettis saga*, among others. She is also extensively mentioned in *Landnámabók*, though here her epithet is *djúpauðga* (Deeply Wealthy), which highlights her status and wealth.[104] There are only thirteen female settlers mentioned in *Landnámabók*, and Unnr receives the most extensive narrative; this is indicative of her status. It has been argued that the depiction of Unnr in *Laxdæla saga* 'sets the tone for a saga in which women's potential for action will be exhibited to the utmost', though others have argued that Unnr serves as the exception and thus showcases what is not possible for women.[105] As Unnr is certainly not the only commanding woman in *Laxdæla saga*, I am inclined to agree with the first statement.

In the same saga Guðrún expresses her desire to travel abroad together with Kjartan. She is denied this by Kjartan, saying that she needs to stay in Iceland to look after her brothers and father (Ch. 40). It is interesting that Guðrún wants to travel as it gives us an insight into what kind of women might want to travel. Guðrún is depicted as a strong-willed character and is, like Unnr, a widow. Widows in the *Íslendingasögur* were often depicted as powerful and independent characters, enjoying freedoms that married women did not have.[106] It is then no great surprise that these women would not only want to travel, but also have to opportunity to travel.

In *Grænlendinga saga* we meet two women who travel overseas. Guðríðr is married to Þorsteinn. He wants to go to Vinland to retrieve the body of his brother and he takes his wife with him (Ch. 5). Guðríðr is described as a wise woman and Þorsteinn is even seen seeking his wife's council. In Greenland Þorsteinn dies and his dead body tells his wife what the future holds for her; she will go to Norway and from there to Iceland, she will remarry, she will go on a pilgrimage, return to Iceland, take the holy order and die (Ch. 5). This is exactly what comes to pass.

Freydís travels to Vinland as well. Whereas Guðríðr is said to be wise, Freydís is shown to have an ill-will. Freydís goes to the brothers Finnbogi and Helgi in the middle of the night, dressed in her husband's cloak (Ch. 7). Just as it did for Bróka-Auðr, this masculinises her and might serve as an explanation for her violent behaviour.[107] Freydís is depicted as a ruthless

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[104] Vanherpen, Sofie, 'In Search of a Founding Mother: The Case of Auðr *djúpauðga* in *Sturlubók*,' *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistiek* 77 (2017): 569.
[105] Cook, 'Women and Men in Laxdæla Saga,' 39.
[106] Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 61-64.
[107] Evans, 'Female Masculinity and the Sagas of the Icelanders,' 73.

murderer. She deceives the brothers and her husband, resulting in the death of Helgi and Finnbogi. Freydís kills many people, for no apparent reason, and subsequently threatens the remaining travelling companions not to tell anyone what has happened, or she will have them killed as well. Back in Greenland, however, the story gets out. Freydís' brother Leifr does not punish her for her misdeeds (Ch. 8).

Interestingly, the depiction of Freydís in the younger *Eiríks saga rauða* is quite different. In this saga, when she and the men in her party are under attack by *Skrælingar* (term for Native or Indigenous Americans), all the men flee, while a pregnant Freydís mocks them for their cowardice. When she also tries to flee, she comes across a body and she takes up his sword, uncovers one of her breasts and slaps it on the sword, thereby scaring away the *Skrælingar* (Ch. 11). In this scene we see a woman mock men for their cowardice and doing what they failed to do, or even attempt. This passage is much discussed in scholarship. Judy Quinn asserts that in her speech Freydís is goading the men, and that by exposing her breast she only intensifies her goading.[108] Kirsten Wolf draws attention to the variant readings in manuscript AM 770 b 4to, believed to be a copy of *Skálholtsbók* with some variant readings. In this manuscript she also bares her breast, but instead of slapping it on the sword she cuts it off and throws it after the *Skrælingar*. Wolf favours this reading and draws parallels between Freydís and the Amazons.[109] Stefán Einarsson has argued that the act of slapping her breast on the sword is in effect whetting the sword, preparing it for battle.[110] By doing this she signals to her attackers that she is ready to defend herself with violence. He also equates her 'barbaric strength and frenzy' as being on a par with that of a berserker.[111] Freydís displays characteristics or behaviours that are traditionally associated with masculinity. This does not negate her femininity, however. In fact, throughout this episode attention is paid to her female body, juxtaposed to her more masculine behaviour. Though she is painted in a very negative light in *Grænlendinga saga*, she is portrayed in a far more favourable light in *Eiríks saga rauða*. However, in both sagas she displays female masculinity. Is her female masculinity part of her having travelled abroad? Before I answer this, let us turn back to Guðríðr.

When we first meet Guðríðr, we are told she is wise and knows how to behave among strangers. She is a very different character to Freydís. It is almost as if she exists to contrast to

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[108] Judy Quinn, 'Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas,' in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 531.

[109] Kirsten Wolf, 'Amazons in Vínland,' *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95, no. 4 (October 1996): 469-485.

[110] Stefán Einarsson, 'The Freydís-Incident in Eiríks Saga Rauða, Ch. 11,' *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 13 (1938-1939): 248-249.

[111] Einarsson, 'The Freydís-Incident in Eiríks Saga Rauða, Ch. 11,' 249-250.

Freydís. Guðríðr is a calm and pious character, almost the direct antithesis of Freydís, who never comes to accept Christianity. Guðríðr has many descendants, whereas Freydís has none (at least not that the author tells us about) as a punishment for her heinous crimes. Guðríðr cannot be said to display any kind of masculine traits. It can therefore not be rightfully concluded that travelling abroad is a reason for Freydís' masculinity. I am aware, of course, that it is impossible to say anything definitive or of value about how travelling abroad might affect a woman's masculinity on the basis of the few examples discussed here; they cannot be taken to be representative of all of the women who travel overseas in the *Íslendingasögur*, let alone the entire Old Norse-Icelandic literary corpus. However, to discuss that in detail is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Another issue I would like to discuss regarding these women, is the question of their honour and status. As already discussed above, Unnr is a well-respected woman, not just on account of her travels, but in general on account of her actions as matriarch. The fact that she takes on a role that is traditionally associated with men does not hinder her dignity or her status. Guðríðr garners respect due to her wisdom and eventually her becoming a nun. Though she is a well-travelled woman, this does not appear to influence her honour or status. This leaves us with Freydís. Her character is heavily associated with masculinity, both in *Eiríks saga rauða* and in *Grænlendinga saga*. She is not a well-respected character in *Grænlendinga saga*, in fact, she is quite the opposite. The author makes no attempts to redeem her or make his scorn for her unknown. In *Eiríks saga rauða*, however, her character's honour and status is somewhat more complicated. After having scared of the native people, she is praised by the men – for her luck. This is an interesting reaction. Could it be that they are ashamed as a result of her mockery and since Freydís has done what they could (or would) not do? Is this why they only praise her for her luck, something outside of her control, and not her actions?

Conclusion

Young men's travels abroad in the *Íslendingasögur* closely follow the pattern of rites of passage as outlined by Van Gennep. Nic Percivall writes: 'There was no single boundary or structure which denoted adulthood had been achieved, but rather there were multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting boundaries and structures. […] The ambiguity surrounding their status may have allowed young Icelandic men to explore the possibilities of adulthood gradually,

rather than making a sudden, 'rites of passage' style entry into the adult male world.'[112] I would have to agree with Percivall. Though the voyages abroad do contribute to the increase of status, honour, and maturity of a young man, sailing abroad alone is not enough to transform a boy into a man.

But how did a boy become an adult, then? The laws give us some clues as to how boys could attain maturity. They cite physical maturity, claiming their inheritance and owning property, and the administration of justice and the laws as ways of achieving adulthood. Proving one's physical maturity was not as simple as merely reaching puberty; it started in childhood with *knattleikr*. These ball games were often quite violent and played an important part in socialization and preparing a youngster for adult life. During their adolescence young men would prove their physical prowess and maturity in fights, which would often take place abroad during their travels, but did not necessarily stop after their return. The proving of one's physical prowess was a continual process. These travels and the various exploits undertaken during them would lead to more honour and status for the young man. This increased status was oftentimes beneficial in pursuing a betrothal. However, if the betrothal had taken place before embarking on their journey and the marriage had been postponed for three years, this was a bad sign. A good marriage could also greatly increase a man's status. After their travels the young men would frequently claim their inheritance or share the head of the household with one of their family members. After returning in Iceland the men would also start to engage in the administration of justice and the laws, which in turn could result in enhanced status and honour.

Of course, men were not the only people to travel abroad. Women were among the settlers of Iceland. Travel would not inherently lead to an increase in honour or status for women, however. It was certainly possible, but it did not have the same connotations for women as they it did for men.

[112] Percivall, 'Teenage Angst: The Structures and Boundaries of Adolescence in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland,' 147.

Chapter 2 – The curious case of *Njáls saga*

In this chapter, I will look at how the aforementioned ways of attaining honour and status are depicted in *Njáls saga*. Theodore M. Andersson has argued that the *Njála* subverts expectations based on traditional narrative patterns.[113] On a similar note Ármann Jakobsson writes that the saga critiques the gender norms of the society it depicts.[114] He writes that the saga is presenting its own masculine ideal, 'which is vastly different from that of the society it depicts.'[115] Though *Njáls saga* may not be representative of how the *Íslendingasögur* depict narrative patterns or societal norms on the whole, by discussing how it does display these things, we get a more well-rounded idea of how these narrative patterns and norms function in the literature. Additionally, I will analyse Njáll's beardlessness. Beards were an important social and cultural marker and I will talk about how this influences Njáll's masculinity.

Subverting expectations

Fighting and raiding to prove one's physical maturity and prowess is also done in the *Njála*. Gunnarr proves his physical and martial prowess, and thus his masculinity, by raiding. He and his brother Kolskeggr fight Vikings several times, before heading to Denmark where they meet King Haraldr Gormsson. Gunnarr is invited by and given a seat next to the king, which is a great sign of respect (Ch. 30-31). On his way back to Iceland he stops in Norway to meet Earl Hákon, whom earlier he had refused to meet, stating '*því at nú em ek at nǫkkuru reyndr, en þá var ek at engu, er þú batt þess næstum.*' ('because now I've been tested somewhat – I was not tested at all the last time you asked me this').[116] This signals that Gunnarr deems himself unworthy of meeting the Earl before he has been tested and proven himself in battle. On a similar note, Njáll's sons are said to be 'untested' before they go abroad. Hallgerðr, a very antagonistic character and wife of Gunnarr, asks what Njáll's sons have been occupying themselves with. '*„Hvat gerðu synir Njáls?´´ sagði hon; „þeir þykkjask nú helzt menn.´´ „Miklir eru þeir at vallarsýn, en óreyndir eru þeir mjǫk,´´ sǫgðu þær[.]*' (''What were Njal's sons doing?' she said. 'They think of themselves as real men.' 'They're pretty big to look at, but they're quite untested,' they said').[117] Njáll's sons are being mocked for not having been

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[113] Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*, 200.
[114] Ármann Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls Saga*,' *Viator* 38 (2007): 195.
[115] Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls Saga*,' 210.
[116] *Njáls saga*, 83; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 51.
[117] *Njáls saga* 112; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 73.

tested. Though the saga does not clarify what they have not been tested in, I would argue that they are untested in battle, which leads to this derogatory remark. Of Njáll's sons, Skarpheðinn is never explicitly told to travel abroad, just like his father. His other sons, Grímr and Helgi, do set sail (Ch. 75, 83-86, 89-90). During their travels they fight Vikings, they fight against the Scottish and go on several raids. However, their travels defy the usual pattern of a voyage abroad which culminates in a marriage. Both men are already married when they set sail. Nor does their journey end in (inter)national renown, symbolized by expensive gifts of foreign kings. Though the Norwegian King gives them gifts, what these are remain unspecified. In fact, their travels do not have a positive outcome. Whereas most voyages end in renown, riches and marriage, their voyage ends in a feud with Þraín, which ultimately results in the burning of Njáll.[118] Njáll himself seems reluctant to take up arms, preferring to settle his disputes at the Alþing. There is one scene in which the audience is told that Njáll is carrying a small axe (Ch. 118). Anita Sauckel has pointed out that in this instance the axe does not function as a weapon. Rather, it is part of a disguise.[119] Ármann Jakobsson also dismisses this carrying of a weapon by Njáll, as his axe is 'probably more suitable for chopping wood than for use in battle.'[120] Therefore, Njáll cannot be described as adhering to the violent masculine model. He does not rely on his physical prowess for honour and status. Njáll's character introduction states that he is '*lǫgmaðr svá mikill*' ('well versed in the law') and '*vitr [...] ok forspár, heilráðr ok góðgjarn*' ('wise and prophetic, sound of advice and well-intentioned').[121] It is these attributes that earn him his respect. It is due to his wisdom, prudence, and sound advice that he is held in high esteem, not for his fighting skills or bravery.

As already briefly mentioned, both Njáll and Skarpheðinn are not explicitly said to travel abroad. When Njáll is introduced the text reads: '*Njáll bjó at Bergþórshváli í Landeyjum; annat bú átti hann í Þórólfsfelli. Hann var vel auðigr at fé ok vænn at áliti, en sá hlutr var á ráði hans, at honum óx eigi skegg. [...] Bergþóra hét kona hans; [...] Þau áttu sex bǫrn.*' ('Njal lived at Bergthorshvol in the Landeyjar. He had a second farm at Thorolfsfell. He was well off for property and handsome to look at, but there was one thing about him: no beard grew on him. [...] Bergthora was his wife's name. [...] They had six children').[122] When we meet Njáll he is already a well-established and well-respected man, in charge of his own farm (which is rather

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[118] Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)*, 196.
[119] Anita Sauckel, '*Brennu-Njáls saga*: An Old Icelandic Trickster (Discourse)?' in *Bad Boys and Wickes Women: Antagonists and Troublemakers in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Daniela Hahn and Andreas Schmidt (München: Herbert Utz-Verlag, 2016), 102-103.
[120] Jakobsson, 'Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls Saga*,' 201.
[121] *Njáls saga*, 57; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 35.
[122] *Njáls saga*, 56-57; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 35-36.

unusually named after his wife, instead of himself), he is married and father to six children. Though he does not travel overseas, he does frequently travel to the Alþing. Apart from his ventures to the Alþing he is said to mainly stay at home, which is unusual for men in the sagas of Icelanders, and something more characteristic of women.[123] Furthermore, when he is introduced, Njáll is already married. His lack of travelling does not seem to have affected his marriage prospects at all. Equally, Skarpheðinn not being a seasoned traveller does not appear to impact his marriage prospects. He marries Þórhildar, though he does not seem particularly keen on marriage; he appears rather indifferent (Ch. 25). His brothers Grímr and Helgi do travel abroad, but unlike the men previously discussed, they are already married when they set sail. As discussed earlier, *Njáls saga* subverts expectations. We have come to expect that travel will lead to a betrothal and marriage, and in *Njáls saga* we see that this is not necessarily true. However, the saga does not always subvert expectations. Gunnarr's marriage follows his travels (Ch. 33). When he first meets Hallgerðr, his future wife, he is wearing clothes given to him by King Haraldr and a bracelet that was a present of Earl Hákon, signalling his status of a well-travelled and highly regarded man and as previously discussed, it is likely that his travels and consequent status influence his betrothal.

Despite the fact that all of the Njállssons get married, none of them settle down on their own farmstead – they all remain at the parental home. Even though after his marriage, Skarpheðinn is the head of his own household, he does not leave his father's farmstead (Ch. 25). Grímr and Helgi meet Kári during their journey and bring him back home to Iceland, where he marries one of Njáll's daughters. He buys a bit of land and sets up a farm on it, but he and his wife keep on living with Njáll, employing some men to take care of their own farm (Ch. 90). Like the other Njálssons, Grímr and Helgi never leave their father's farmstead, though they are both married and technically heads of their own households. This may appear odd, and many scholars have written about the seeming reluctance of the Njálssons to leave the parental home and become masters of their own households. It has been argued that Njáll uses his sons as his own personal executive power, to compensate for his own lack of aggression and physical prowess.[124] According to Miller Njáll's sons stay at home because Njáll is a *homo novus*, an up-and-coming man, who lacks the wealth and status to provide land and farms to his sons.[125] However, as Sauckel has pointed out, Njáll can hardly be described as a *homo novus*. He is

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[123] Sauckel, '*Brennu-Njáls Saga*: An Old Icelandic Trickster (Discourse)?,' 102.
[124] Sauckel, '*Brennu-Njáls Saga*: An Old Icelandic Trickster (Discourse)?,' 103-104.
[125] William Ian Miller, *Why is Your Axe Bloody? A Reading of Njáls Saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 34.

introduced as 'well off for property' and having a second farm; he is a descendant of a Norwegian *hersir* (nobleman) and is a reputable lawyer; in short, he is not a typical *homo novus.* But this still does not explain why his sons do not become independent heads of their own households. As Skarpheðinn is never said to have travelled abroad and his brothers arguably fail to bring their travels to a successful ending, could this be the reason for them remaining at their parental home? They never achieve a certain level of maturity and so must remain sheltering under their father's roof. However, it could also be another instance of shared headship of the household, as was the case with Egill. It is possible that Skarpheðinn and his brothers are living at their father's farm because they share in his duties as the head of the household, and are waiting for him to formally hand over the running of the farm to them.

Of beards and men

Njáll's masculinity is often called into question. Contributing factors to this might be his unwillingness to take up arms and his preference to stay at home. Yet it appears that his beardlessness is far more damning for his manliness than the aforementioned reasons. On several occasions characters such as Hallgerðr and Flósi mock Njáll for his lack of a beard. Hallgerðr is the first to call Njáll '*skegglausa*' (Old Beardless) and his sons '*taðskegglinga*' (Dung-beardlings), implying that the only way his sons could have beards is by putting dung on their faces.[126] But why was having, or rather, not having, facial hair so important? That it was seems rather obvious, since it is one of the first things the audience is told in Njáll's introduction (Ch. 20). The *Íslendingasögur* do not give many physical descriptions and if they do occur, they tend to be brief. In fact, a standard introduction of a saga character consists of a genealogy, his abilities (e.g. well-versed in the law) and his character. Comments on the physicality of the character usually consist of formulaic sentences (e.g. he was tall and strong, or simply stating that they are beautiful).[127] The saga author seems to think Njáll's beardlessness is remarkable, for though physical descriptions are rare in the *Íslendingasögur*, in Njáll's introduction we are immediately told that he was not able to grow a beard, drawing more attention to this fact.

Hair was a significant cultural and social marker in the Middle Ages.[128] That beards were an important social indicator is not only evident in *Njáls saga*, but also, if not more so, in

[126] *Njáls saga*, 113; Cook, *Njal's Saga*, 74.
[127] Sarah Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 108-110.
[128] Hair can function in these ways even in today's society. Hippies, metalheads, punks and marines are all associated with a certain hairdo.

Eiríks saga rauða. Karlsefni comes across five native or indigenous people in Vinland. They are described as follows: '*ok var einn skeggjaðr; konur váru tvær ok bǫrn tvau.*' ('One was bearded, two were women and two of them children').[129] This clearly illustrates that having a beard set you apart from women and children: having a beard meant that you were an adult male. Beards in medieval Icelandic society were seen as indicators of, and prerequisites for, masculinity, or at the very least a bodily signifier of manliness.[130] The connection between beards and manliness was not only made in the Icelandic family sagas, however. Robert Bartlett notes that the *Sachsenspiegel*, 'Saxon Mirror', a thirteenth-century lawbook written in Middle Low German and the most important lawbook of the Holy Roman Empire, describes the proof of age for a man: '*hevet he har in dem barde unde nedene unde under iewelkeme arme, so scal men weten, dat he to sinen dagen komen is*' ('if he has hair in his beard and down below and beneath each arm, then one will know that he is of age').[131] As beard growth relies on hormones, which (in those days at least) was outside a person's control, it is not unsurprising that being able to grow a beard was a sign of maturity, and in reverse, that the lack of a beard was a sign of immaturity. The medieval opinion on beards might be summed up in the idea that a man lacking a beard cannot be a proper man at all.[132]

Using beards as a way of insult is not unique to *Njáls saga*. Oren Falk notes that the sagas recognize assaults on beards as an extreme form of aggression.[133] In fact, the copy of *Grágás* in the Codex Regius states (though here both hair and facial hair are probably meant):

> Þessi av*erk* metaz se*m* in meire sár. Ef m*að*r sceʀ tu*n*go or hofde ma*nn*e e*ða* stingr avgo or höfðe m*anz* e*ða* brytr teɴ or höfðe ma*nz*. e*ða* sceʀ af ma*nn*e nef e*ða* eyro.[134]
>
> (These injuries are appraised like the major wounds: if one cuts the tongue out of a person's head or pokes the eyes out of a person's head or breaks the teeth out of a person's head; or cuts a person's hair off, the nose or the eyes).[135]

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[129] *Eiríks saga rauða*, 233; Keneva Kunz, trans., 'Eirik the Red's Saga,' in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 673.
[130] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 13; Oren Falk, 'Beardless Wonders: 'Gaman vas Sǫxu' (The Sex Was Great),' in *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, ed. Antonia Harbus and Russell Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 232-235.
[131] *Sachsenspiegel*, 104; Robert Bartlett, 'Symbolic Meanings of Hair in the Middle Ages,' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 4 (1994): 44.
[132] Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature*, 144.
[133] Falk, 'Beardless Wonders: 'Gaman vas Sǫxu' (The Sex Was Great),' 236.
[134] *Grágás I*, 147-148.
[135] Falk, 'Beardless Wonders: 'Gaman vas Sǫxu' (The Sex Was Great),' 236.

In *Egils saga* Egill meets Ármóðr skeg. Ármóðr does not treat Egill with the required hospitality, and though Egill can be persuaded not to kill the man, he does '*[s]íðan sneið Egill af honum skeggit við hǫkuna[.]*' ('[t]hen Egill cut off Armod's beard close to the chin').[136] In *Víga-Glúms saga* we come across another instance where a beard is used for insult. Bárðr tells Vigfúss: '*[...] at þú munt optar hafa staðit nær búrhillum ok ráðit um matargerð með móður þinni en gengit at hestavígum, ok er þann veg litt skegg þitt eigi síðr*' ('[…] you must have stood by the larder shelves and discussed the cooking with your mother more often than you've been to horsefights – that's what it looks like from your pretty little blonde beard anyway').[137] Jónas Kristjánsson notes that Bárðr means that his beard is feminine in colour. In response to this, Vigfúss laughs. We only understand how grievous an insult this is when we are told that Vigfúss laughs when he is in a killing mood and subsequently kills Bárðr (Ch. 19).

Though the *Íslendingasögur* claim to be historical, we are nevertheless dealing with literary characters. As Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir writes: '[i]t should be kept in mind that despite the illusion of social, historical, and topographical reality, the world of the Íslendingasögur is an imagined space and as such obeys the laws of literary creations.'[138] What can the descriptions of these imaginary, literary bodies tell us about their identity, if anything at all? According to Sarah Künzler

> [b]odies embody identity, they are identity in physical form, but they also simultaneously mediate this identity to the world. […] It might be argued that because the characters discussed here are the product of narrative imagination, their bodies are consciously and deliberately fashioned and *installed* in relation to their disposition or role in the text.[139]

Not only do we have a fairly remarkable physical description of Njáll – on account of his lack of a beard and because we get fairly detailed description – but it is not unthinkable that his beardlessness was used as a literary device to signal something to the audience about his character.

Njáll is not the only beardless character in Old Icelandic literature, however. The titular hero of *Þiðreks saga af Bern* never seems to grow a beard. The saga is sometimes classified as a *fornaldarsaga* while others have classified it as a *riddarasaga*. In the saga we see a merging

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[136] *Egils saga*, 228; Scudder, 'Egil's Saga,' 140.
[137] *Víga-Glúms saga*, 62; McKinnel, *Viga-Glums Saga: With the Tales of Ögmund Bash and Thorvald Chatterbox*, 95.
[138] Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature: Bodies, Words, and Power*, 3.
[139] Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature*, 61.

of genuine Old Icelandic or Norse ideas and older, Low German ideas on bodies. While Þiðrek is beardless, he is depicted as giantlike with broad shoulders. Unlike Njáll, Þiðrek's lack of facial hair is never used as a means for taunting; in fact, other characters do not even comment on it.[140] In *Karlamagnús saga*, a character named Bófi inn skegglausi (the Beardless) appears. In *Landnámabók* one of the ancestors of Grettir is named as Ásmundr skegglaus. Interestingly, Njáll does not receive such an epithet in *Landnámabok*.[141] As Ursula Dronke notes, '[n]o opprobrium is attached to any of these beardless men except Njáll, and we are not told that he was mocked for his physical eccentricity until Hallgerðr Long-breeches, Höskuldr's daughter, began to do so.'[142]

In light of all this, we can conclude that Njáll's beardlessness is remarkable. However, as Dronke has pointed out, Njáll did not receive any negative comments about his smooth cheeks before Hallgerðr started mocking him. Are we then simply dealing with a bad joke gotten out of hand, or is there something more to it? I argue that Njáll's apparent lack of journeying abroad and his unwillingness to fight are connected to his masculinity being called into question, and therefore connected to his lack of a beard. Is it not possible, that since Njáll never achieved a certain sense of maturity, a certain level of violent masculinity, that the saga author uses his lack of facial hair as a literary device to signal to the audience that Njáll is, in some sense, not entirely mature, not adhering to the dominant masculine model? On the other hand, since beard growth is a secondary sexual characteristic and thus a sign of maturity, would it not make more sense for the characters in *Njáls saga* to link his beardlessness with mockery of his apparent youthfulness, instead of mocking his supposed effeminacy?

Evans has said that hegemonic masculine characters should not partake in 'irregular' sexual practices.[143] These 'irregular' sexual practices are often indicated with the somewhat illusive term *níð.* Meulengracht Sørensen explains that to accuse someone of *níð* was to accuse someone of being a passive homosexual or someone that had been used in that way; that is to say, that he was *ragr*, 'cowardly, effeminate',[144] 'and in the world of the sagas nothing hits a man harder than the allegation that he is no man.'[145] These were therefore grave insults and had to be avenged by blood-revenge or challenged in a battle.[146] Thus, the greatest insult a man in

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[140] Künzler, *Flesh and Word: Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and Early Irish Literature*, 151-152.
[141] Ursula Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1981), 11.
[142] Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls Saga*, 11.
[143] Evans, *Men and Masculinities in the Sagas of Icelanders*, 25.
[144] Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*, 'ragr'.
[145] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, 11.
[146] Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, 32.

medieval Iceland could receive, was that of *níð*, that of cowardice and effeminacy. If Hallgerðr really wanted to hurt Njáll, she was right in choosing to attack his manhood and not his youthful appearance.

This leaves us with the problem of Skarpheðinn, however. Just like his father, he is never said to leave Iceland and thus arguably, never fully becomes an adult. Where Njáll's incomplete maturity can be said to be symbolised by his lack of facial hair, this does not appear to be the case for Skarpheðinn: he has a full beard. Neither is Skarpheðinn's masculinity called into question. The only times that could be said to happen, being called '*taðskegglinga*', it is in relation to him being the son of an effeminate man (Ch. 44). Skarpheðinn is depicted as a 'stereotypical' aggressive man, with his manic grin and axe-wielding. Njáll, on the other hand, is far more peaceful. How can we reconcile these two very different depictions of potentially immature men? Is it perhaps due to a changing view of masculinity that Njáll and Skarpheðinn are treated in such different ways? It is also possible that, since beards were thought of as a marker of manhood, Njáll's beardlessness is used as a literary device to signal to the saga's audience that he does not adhere to the dominant, violent masculine model. Instead, he is a calm and peaceful character. This would also explain why Skarpheðinn does have a beard; he does adhere to the violent masculine model, and it is possible that the author simply saw no reason to mention his journey abroad.

Conclusion

Njáls saga subverts the audience's expectations. In accordance with other *Íslendingasögur* the audience has certain expectations, which the author of the *Njála* seems to delight in breaking. As discussed in the first chapter, physical prowess and maturity was established through games, tests, and fights abroad. The journeys abroad would provide the young men with the status and respect that would aid them in pursuing a good marriage, which in turn would enhance their honour. Claiming their inheritance, owning their own property and maintaining their own farm would again lend them status, as would success in judicial practices. Of the characters discussed, only Gunnarr seems to adhere to most of these outlines. He sets sail and raids, garnering honour and respect and upon his returns he enters into marriage.

Njáll, however, does not adhere to the same masculine model. The saga never explicitly (or implicitly) states that Njáll travels abroad. Nor is he a violent man. The only time in the saga that he carries a weapon, it is not with violent intent, and he prefers to settle his disputes at the þing. One might assume that Njáll is therefore not a highly regarded member of society, but

this is not true. He is respected for other attributes, such as his wisdom, advice, and knowledge of the law. Njáll's sons also do not follow the this pattern. The text does not state that Skarpheðinn travels abroad, but this does not affect his marriage prospects. Controversially, his brothers Grímr and Helgi are already married when they set sail. Their travels do not culminate in the expected honours, riches and fortune. A feud which starts while they are abroad culminates in their demise; only Kári survives.

Despite the fact that Njáll is a well-regarded member of society, he is mocked for not having a beard. Beards were bodily indicators of male adulthood, and since Njáll does not have one, I have argued that his beardlessness could be a literary device to signal to the audience that he does not adhere to the violent masculine model that was dominant at that time.

Conclusion

Travelling was an important factor in a man's masculinity, honour, status and maturing. Young men travelling abroad, undergoing a series of tests, and subsequently returning home and settling down and getting married is very reminiscent of the rites of passage as theorized by Arnold van Gennep. Travelling to foreign territories was not enough to reach adulthood on its own, however. Though it was an important axis of attaining maturity, it certainly was not the only one.

Grágás, a collection of medieval Icelandic laws, notes several criteria for entering into adulthood. These are physical maturity, ownership of a property, administration of justice and the laws. In addition to these, I have discussed travel and marriage as ways to achieve maturity. Physical strength and prowess had to be proven throughout a man's life and started during childhood with *knattleikr*. During their adolescence young men would travel abroad where they would be tested in games or physical fights. After his return to Iceland, a man could still engage in games or continue to prove his strength and physical prowess in feuds. These travels and the various exploits undertaken during them would lead to an increase in honour and status. A man's voyage abroad could enhance their chances of a successful marriage and betrothal, as his travels could lead to an increase in honour, status, prestige and wealth. However, if a marriage had been postponed for three years in favour of overseas travel, this was regarded as a bad sign and often ended in tragedy. Not only could honour and prestige be beneficial in pursuing a marriage, but a good marriage in itself could increase a man's status.

The ownership of one's own property could come about as a result of coming into one's inheritance, often after the death of the father. However, this was not always what happened. Shared headship of a household was a common occurrence in medieval Icelandic society, in which father and son (or brothers, or mother and son) would share the duties and head of the household. Owning one's own property and being successful at it could lead to an increase in honour. Occasionally, however, a dispute regarding an inheritance would arise, which would then be settled at a þing. Cases at the þing, if they were handled well and ended in your favour, could also enhance someone's status. However, as with physical fighting, a man was also liable to lose status.

Njáls saga subverts expectations based on the narrative patterns presented in other *Íslendingasögur*. Though Gunnarr seems to adhere to most of these patterns, Njáll and his sons do not. The interplay between marriage and travel is not present for these characters, nor do

they seem to derive much honour or status from their exploits abroad. They certainly do not lead to the riches and renown we have come to expect. Njáll is arguably the biggest offender of these narrative patterns. He does not seem to travel, does not fight and he does not have a beard. Beards were important social markers; they were physical indicators of male adulthood. I have argued that his beardlessness is a literary device to signal to the audience that Njáll does not adhere to the hegemonic masculine model. He is a peaceful, rather than a violent man, who would rather settle his disputes at the Alþing than in an armed conflict.

We cannot paint a complete picture of medieval Icelandic masculinity in connection to travel, if we disregard the women who travel. Historically, women must have travelled to and from Iceland, especially during the Settlement Age. It is not uncommon in the sagas that the young hero marries abroad and travels back home to Iceland with his new bride. However, if we look at sagas that pay greater attention to women travellers, we do not find a singular, decisive portrayal of these women. Their characters differ widely, and could be argued to be each other's opposites. They can be fierce, powerful, and highly regarded women, the exact opposite, or somewhere in between. Admittedly, the number of women I have looked at can hardly be called representative, and this calls for further research to be conducted.

Becoming an adult is not an instantaneous event. It is a gradual process, which could take place over the course of several years, and proving one's masculinity was a continuous, ongoing act, something a man had to do throughout his life. Honour and status could be gained, lost, and re-gained. Masculinity was not necessarily as 'toxic' (if you will forgive my use of a buzzword) as many believe it to be. Medieval Icelandic society could be very violent, but violence was often used to protect one's family. Reasonless, senseless violence was frowned upon in their society. Being reasonable and able to protect and provide for one's family were highly valued attributes.

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