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**It's in Their Nature;
Examining Revenants in The Icelandic Sagas and What
They Represent in Early Medieval Society**

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INTRODUCTION

Concepts of revenants and walking corpses can be found as far back as the Iron Age in most of Europe.¹ Apart from the eastern European vampires, they are perhaps most prominent in Icelandic literature and there is a specific word to describe a walking corpse: *draugr*. Like the vampire, Icelandic revenants are corporeal and have more in common with them than other Western European ghosts; Bram Stoker's first Icelandic translator even called Dracula a *manndraugr*.² *Draugr* is translated as 'the dead inhabitant of a cairn, ghost, spirit'³ and the term is usually translated into English as 'ghost.'⁴ In poetic language *draugr* is used to mean a wooden log as a kenning for humans.⁵ Although it is generally agreed that these are separate words, Ármann Jakobsson has argued in his 2011 article that the revenants could conceivably have gotten their name from the poetic metaphor, identifying the dead body as returning to its 'natural state'. After all, in Norse mythology the first humans, Ask and Embla, are created from two logs.⁶ The Icelandic ghosts usually wake of their own accord, though there is a tradition in literature and poetry of waking the dead to ask the future. The word *draugr* itself is used rarely in medieval Icelandic texts, but is more commonly employed as a catch-all term for a revenant in modern scholarship.⁷ With this in mind I will primarily refer to the undead as revenants or ghosts, though if I use the word *draugr* it will be in this way.

Although there are endless facets of revenants in the literature to be examined, I will be focusing mainly on the ghosts themselves in the sagas, who they were, what they did while alive and after death, and what this reveals about the society at the time of writing. Revenants were people who did not fit well into the community and wider Icelandic society. They disrupt or reveal disruptions in societal norms in life and in death. Usually first-generation immigrants or people with a non-Norwegian or Icelandic background, they are disliked or cause trouble and violence. I have concentrated my study on five sagas which include at least one person who becomes a walking corpse; *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Grettis saga*, *Laxdæla saga*, and the *Vinland sagas*. First, I will recount the story of the revenant in each of the sagas and then analyse the ways in which they are disruptive to the community while living and when they are revenants, focusing on their actions in the texts.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Most of the revenants are people who do not assimilate into the community in life and manifest this after death as well. Alternatively, they can appear because of some societal slight or embody the religious conflict of the time. They are often foreigners or recent immigrants. While living they are often disliked by others in the community or they make them uncomfortable, through violence and strife or even just their appearance. After death, the ghosts are corporeal and able to interact with the living, to varying extents. It is often difficult to bury them as they grow heavy and start to swell. But when they are disinterred, though their appearance has become monstrous, they have not decomposed and are unnaturally preserved. They haunt at night, especially in winter, and only on the farms and properties that they had a connection to in life, riding the roof of the hall. Animals either die at their hands or from mere proximity to the grave, there are also several incidents of the ghost manifesting as an animal and haunting that way. Several of the revenants possess some magic or prophetic ability, often foretelling their own death. Their main purpose after death is to haunt and in doing

¹ Classen, 'When the Dead No Longer Rest: The Religious Significance of Revenants in Sagas Set in Viking Age Settlements Around the Time of Conversion', in *Death in the Middle-Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death*, 2018, 133.

² Jakobsson, 'Vampires and Watchmen: Categorizing the Mediaeval Icelandic Undead', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 110 (2011), 299.

³ 'Draugr', Zoega's Old Icelandic Dictionary,

<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2003.02.0002:entry=draugr&toc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2003.02.0002%3Aalphabetic+letter%3Da>> [accessed 10/05/2018]

⁴ Jakobsson, 2011, 281.

⁵ *Ibid*, 284.

⁶ Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1995), 13.

⁷ *Ibid*, 284.

so they regularly harass and even murder people. The people who are killed by the revenant often haunt alongside it, becoming undead themselves. They are banished by the removal of the head followed by cremation or alternatively through legal proceedings, or the resolution of conflict.

THE UNDEAD

EYRBYGGJA SAGA

Eyrbyggja Saga is one of the earliest Icelandic sagas and is notable for the numerous supernatural elements it contains. It tells of the settlement and the early history of the Snæfellsnes peninsula as well as the development of Icelandic society, which takes shape as the plot progresses.⁸ The two revenants, Thorolf Twist-Foot and Thorgunna, are both catalysts for the series of supernatural events that follow their deaths.

THOROLF TWIST-FOOT

Thorolf Twist-Foot enters the saga with violence, he is well versed in it and he is described as a 'great viking.'⁹ He is the son of Geirrid who was given land at Borgardale by her brother Geirodd, one of the first settlers of Eyr. Because of Thorolf's late arrival he must gain his lands through violence and he fights Ulfar to the death for his farm. The fight results in an injury to Thorolf's leg, causing him to walk with a limp and earning him the nickname 'Twist-Foot.' Thorolf is greedy and disliked and believes he does not have enough property or power which is the cause of all his disputes and his eventual death. Thorolf dies in a fury after his son refuses to help him feud against Snorri the Priest to gain more land. He storms home in a rage and is found the next morning lifeless and still sitting in his high-seat.

Thorolf haunts the farm at Hvamm at night, the oxen who pulled Thorolf's body to his cairn are *trollriða* ('ridden to death by trolls') and animals around his grave go mad and die.¹⁰ He chases the shepherd home every night, eventually killing him. He rides the roof at night and haunts his widow until she also goes mad and dies, while everybody else abandons the farm. Everybody who is killed by Thorolf is later seen haunting alongside him. Arnkel eventually decides to move Thorolf's body, but when the cairn is broken open the corpse is discovered 'uncorrupted and very ugly looking.'¹¹ Thorolf's ghost resumes haunting the farms and estates around him after Arnkel's death until he is disinterred once again, this time by Thorodd Thorbrandsson, the new owner of the Ulfarsfell and Orlygsstad estates. When revealed, his body is again uncorrupted and ugly, but this time also as black and swollen. Thorolf's body is taken down to the foreshore and burned to ashes. The ashes are collected and deposited into the sea but most were scattered by the wind and end up being licked up by one of Thorodd's cows. The cow gives birth to a huge calf given the name Glæsir (another incarnation of Thorolf). The calf grows into an ill-tempered bull who goes mad and kills Thorodd before disappearing into a river, never to be seen again.

THORGUNNA

Thorgunna is the second revenant in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. She arrives from the Hebrides soon after Iceland's conversion to Christianity, though she is already Christian. She is a 'massive woman, tall, broadly built, and getting very stout.'¹² Though she is devout and proper 'she wasn't easy to get on with and didn't waste much time on conversation.'¹³

⁸ Wanner, 'Purity and Danger in Earliest Iceland: Excrement, Blood, Sacred Space, and Society in *Eyrbyggja Saga*', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 5 (2009), 213.

⁹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Edinburgh: Southside, 1973), ch8.

¹⁰ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, (Reykjavik: Kostnaðarmaður Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1921) ch34.

¹¹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch34.

¹² *Ibid*, ch50.

¹³ *Ibid*, ch50.

A portent in the form of a black cloud arrives and moves towards Frodriver which bursts and rains blood over the farmstead. The blood dries everywhere but on the hay that Thorgunna had been working. She foresees her own death and tells Thorodd her instructions for her body and belongings. She asks for a Christian burial at Skalholt which she predicts will soon become the most venerated place in Iceland, and it does eventually become the seat of the first native Icelandic bishop.¹⁴ She gives specific instructions for her bed and bed-clothes to be burnt, warning trouble if they are not. Her wishes are ignored as Thurid persuades Thorodd to let her keep the bed-linens. Thorgunna's body is carried off by the corpse-bearers who encounter extremely bad weather on their way to Skalholt and ask for shelter at a farm but are refused hospitality. Later that night sounds are heard from the larder and when investigated, Thorgunna is found there preparing food for the corpse-bearers. She lays the table, serves the meal, and when the farmer apologises for his inhospitable behaviour she walks out the room again, back to her coffin.

People begin to die at the farm, starting with the shepherd who begins to act ill-tempered and dies in his bed. Thorir Wood-Leg is confronted by the shepherd one night on his way to the out-house and dies soon afterwards. The illness spreads to one of the farmhands and then to six others who all die. At one-point a seal rises up through the floor of the living-room and turns its eyes towards Thorgunna's bed canopy and then disappears. Thorodd and his men are drowned and their bodies are never found. Soon after, Thorodd and his men appear at their own funeral feast followed by Thorir Wood-Leg and the others who died and sit by the fire every night. Thorgrima Witch-Face another six people die and they haunt alongside the rest. Thorgunna's bed-hangings are eventually burnt and the rest of the ghosts are summoned to a door court where they are banished one by one. Holy water is then sprinkled and holy relics carried to every corner of the house, while mass is sung the next morning banishing the ghosts once and for all.

GRETTIS SAGA

GLAM

Glam is hired as the shepherd for the farm at Thorhallsstad, which is being haunted. He is a new settler from Sweden and disagreeable. He is described as very striking, a big man with 'large grey eyes and wolf grey hair' and he is unafraid of the prospect of ghosts.¹⁵ Glam is hated by the household because 'he abstained from mass, had no religion, and was stubborn and surly.'¹⁶ Glam eats his meal on Yule-tide eve, ignoring Christian customs. Afterwards he goes out to work in a blizzard and does not return in the evening. Glam's body is found up in the mountains and his corpse is black and swollen and it is assumed that he has fought and been killed by the previous spirit. The people of the community try to carry him to a church but he is too heavy and his body disappears when a priest arrives. They try to move him three times over three days but he is too heavy even for oxen to move so he is buried under a cairn of stones where he lies. Glam haunts the farm, causing injuries, riding the roof, and driving people off.

The next shepherd to be hired, Thorgaut, is Christian and popular but he is killed in the same way as Glam; he disappears on Yule-tide eve and is found by Glam's cairn with his neck and every bone in his body broken. Although this time when Thorgaut is buried, it is in the Church and he does not haunt alongside Glam. Everybody but Thorhall, Gudrun, and the cowherd are run off the farm, and soon the cowherd is found dead with his back broken.

Grettir hears of the haunting from his uncle and rides to Thorhallsstad. Grettir's horse is killed on the second night and Glam shows up on the third night, tearing through the house and riding on the roof. They fight in the hall and Glam struggles to get out the door, but 'Grettir saw that however hard he was to deal with in the house, he would be worse outside.'¹⁷ Eventually

¹⁴ Ibid, ch51.

¹⁵ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. G. A. Hight (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1929), ch32.

¹⁶ Ibid, ch32.

¹⁷ Ibid, ch35.

they fall out of the house and Glam looks up at the moon, causing Grettir to freeze and Glam curses him. Grettir cuts off Glam's head and lays it between the thighs and he and Thorhall burn Glam to ashes, put the ashes in a skin and bury them 'far from the haunts of man or beast.'¹⁸

LAXDÆLA SAGA

KILLER-HRAPP

Laxdæla Saga is one of the earliest family sagas and spans more than a century.¹⁹ Hrapp is Scottish on his father's side and was born in the Hebrides. He was known as Killer-Hrapp and had fled to Iceland after he refused to make retribution for crimes he committed on the islands. A 'big, strong man', Hrapp is a bully and disliked by his neighbours, he becomes more and more aggressive though he becomes confined to his bed as he ages.²⁰ He predicts his death from illness and asks to be buried upright in the kitchen doorway so that he can always watch over his property. He haunts the farm after death and kills most of his servants causing Hrafsstadir to become deserted. Hrapp's body is disinterred and moved, after which the hauntings decrease.

Thorstein then decides to move to Hrafsstadir but the crossing is difficult and their ferry becomes stuck against the current. An extremely large seal, with long flippers and human-like eyes appears and swims round the boat several times. Eventually the boat becomes unstuck but is capsized by a sudden storm and everybody aboard dies, leaving the farm at Hrafsstadir abandoned. The farm is bought many years later by Olaf the Peacock. The first winter though, the farmhand refuses to go to the cowshed because Hrapp is standing in the doorway. Olaf tries to attack Hrapp with a spear but Hrapp breaks it before sinking into the earth. Hrapp's body is dug up and found perfectly preserved with the broken spear blade of Olaf's. They burn his body and spread his ashes out at sea, ending the hauntings.

THE VINLAND SAGAS

The *Saga of the Greenlanders* and the *Eirik the Red's Saga* make up what is known as the *Vinland Sagas*. Written down separately in the thirteenth century, they both recount the same basic tale and contain some of the earliest recorded descriptions of North America.²¹

THE SAGA OF THE GREENLANDERS

THORSTEIN EIRIKSSON AND GRIMHLID

In the *Saga of the Greenlanders* Thorstein Eiriksson marries Gudrid Thorbjarnardottir and sets off to Vinland to collect his brother Thorvald's body. They encounter storms on the journey and only make it as far as Lysufjord in Greenland. Thorsteinn and Gudrid accept an invitation from Thorstein the Black for accommodation over the winter, though he warns them that he and his wife are still pagan. Thorstein Eiriksson's companions become ill and die and the illness spreads to Grimhlid, Thorstein the Black's wife, and Thorstein Eiriksson himself. Grimhlid is the first to die and when Thorstein the Black leaves the room, Grimhlid sits up and feels for her shoes. She collapses again when Thorstein re-enters the room. Like most revenants she has become extremely heavy and Thorstein the Black struggles removing her from the room: 'he was a large, strong man, and needed to call upon all his strength before he managed to remove his wife from the farm.'²² Thorstein Eiriksson then worsens and dies but during the night he sits up and asks for Gudrid three times. Thorstein the Black asks him what he wants and Thorstein Eiriksson then answers with a prophecy for Gudrid's future after which Thorstein's corpse falls back and he is taken to the ship.

¹⁸ Ibid, ch35.

¹⁹ Smiley, *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Group inc., 2000), p274.

²⁰ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Keneva Kunz (New York: Penguin Group inc., 2000) ch9.

²¹ Ibid, p626.

²² *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, trans. Keneva Kunz (New York: Penguin Group inc., 2000), ch5.

EIRIK THE RED'S SAGA**THORSTEIN EIRIKSSON AND SIGRID**

In *Eirik the Red's Saga* the story is much the same, Thorstein Eiriksson marries Gudrid and tries to travel to Vinland but gets stuck in Lysufjord. In this version Thorstein Eiriksson owns Lysufjord and Thorstein the Black owns a half share and his wife is named Sigrid. The first to die of the illness on the farm is the unpopular foreman, Gardi. The sickness quickly catches and Thorstein Eiriksson and Sigrid fall ill. Sigrid and Gudrid go to the outhouse one night and Sigrid sees all the dead standing in the doorway, herself and Thorstein included. Sigrid dies in the night and the men leave to go fishing, but at dusk Thorstein the Black is fetched back to the farm as Sigrid is getting up and trying to get into bed with Thorstein Eiriksson. Thorstein the Black rushes back and strikes her with an axe in the chest. Thorstein Eiriksson dies after sundown and Gudrid is woken in the middle of the night because he is asking for her. He tells them that God has allowed him extra time in order to tell Gudrid her future. He speaks to her quietly and then asks to be taken to church along with all the other dead and buried properly in consecrated ground, he says that Gardi should be burned on a pyre though because he started the hauntings. He tells her that her future is promising but that she won't marry a Greenlander and he also asks her to donate their money to the church or the poor, after which he sinks down again.

ANALYSIS**ONE OF US?****IMMIGRATION AND ORIGIN MYTHS**

A common characteristic of the Icelandic revenants is that they are all either recent or first-generation immigrants and from somewhere other than Norway. Identity is a difficult thing to define in the early medieval period and it would be irresponsible to say that these characters saw where they were born as a cornerstone of their personality, as is common today. Three years' residency in Iceland meant that a foreigner could be accepted as a judge and was brought under the umbrella of Icelandic law.²³ Clearly nationality and identity were fluid, at least in the eyes of the law. That being said, with the emerging nationalism of the period in which that sagas were written down, the roots of the people who become revenants is significant.

Though Iceland was settled from a variety of different British and Scandinavian countries, Norway was and is seen as the cultural homeland. Ari Thorgilsson writes in the *Íslendingabók* that Iceland was settled entirely from Norway.²⁴ Thorgilsson essentially creates a national identity which leads to the valuation of Norwegian kinship groups over others and this is shown in the characterisation of the revenants in the sagas. This hierarchy can be seen in the *Grágás* law books, as foreigners who can speak *ḍǫnsk tunga* or 'our language' (commonly used for 'Norse language') are allowed more legal rights than those who do not speak the shared language.²⁵ Thorgunna is Hebridean and Hrapp is half Hebridean and half Scottish. They are both late settlers and both from a country that is within the Viking diaspora but with linguistic differences and therefore 'other.' Glam is Swedish and is doubly 'other' because he is resolutely pagan. Swedish settlers are usually portrayed in a more negative

²³ Vohra, 'One of Us? Negotiating Multiple Legal Identities across the Viking Diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39 (2016), 218.

²⁴ Jesch, 'Identities', in *The Viking Diaspora* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 192.

²⁵ Vohra, 2016, 211.

light in the sagas because they took longer to convert to Christianity than the rest of Scandinavia.²⁶

There is no mention of where Thorolf Twist-foot was born, we know that his uncle is one of the first settlers of Eyr and Thorolf's mother arrived soon after, followed some years later by Thorolf. Despite this genealogy, Thorolf's late immigration means that he has arrived after all the land has been claimed and he sets out to gain his own through violence. Compounding this, Thorolf chooses to sell off portions of his land to two freedmen in chapter eight. Land-giving was an important social process for the early Icelanders, creating social ties, obligations and cementing relationships.²⁷ Thorolf's refuses to do this and instead chooses material wealth over long-term obligations and prestige. His refusal to abide by the customs of the community sets him apart and actually costs him the power that he so desperately wants. Hrapp purchased his farm when he arrived in Iceland, also setting him apart from the community and the custom of land-giving. His arrival is preceded by violence as he had to flee the Hebrides as an outlaw. Like Thorolf, he is greedy and covetous of property and power which he has been denied because he has not followed the proper route to property ownership. He continues his violence and bullying against his neighbours in Iceland as does Thorolf and their violence continues in their hauntings after death.

LAW AND PERSONHOOD

Legal belonging was built into the functioning of the social group of early Icelanders.²⁸ The early period of Icelandic history is characterised by its status as a society without any real royal or aristocratic state but an elaborate and highly developed legal system.²⁹ Legal identity is tied up with personhood and status in the period. It was up to the individual to bring charges if they had been wronged and justice is carried out in the public realm.³⁰ The legal system is therefore incredibly important to the community. It is telling that the drowned men of *Eyrbyggja Saga* are banished through legal means: they are summoned to a door court. The ghosts are summoned one by one and accused of 'trespassing on the home and robbing people of life and health.'³¹ The revenants' presence is negatively affecting the living in the community and they can no longer stay. When each of them stand to go they repeat some version of the refrain, 'I've sat here as long as people would let me.'³² The world of the living is no longer their proper place, emphasised by the fact that they sit by the fire each night and cannot get dry, but they are still bound by the law and its power. Because they no longer fit into the community they must leave it, and they do, but only when forced.

Thorgunna's ghost appears when the farmer and his family at Nether Ness refuse the corpse-bearers hospitality. She takes it upon herself to do what the farmer should have, and her waking appears to be a moral lesson. The disturbing sight of a naked ghost preparing a meal is compounded by the inherent threat in her emergence. She has risen because the farmer will not act properly within the rules of society and shelter the corpse-bearers. Not only are they making an already difficult journey worse by not offering basic hospitality but they are also threatening Thorgunna's Christian burial itself. When Thorolf is buried for the second time, Arnkel asks for help to move the body and we are told by the author that the law states that 'everybody must help bury the dead if he is asked for his assistance.'³³ The corpse-

²⁶ Bennett, 'Burial Practices as Sites of Cultural Memory in the Íslendingasögur', Viking and *Medieval Scandinavia*, 10 (2014), 45.

²⁷ Mclennan, 'Monstrosity in Old English and Old Icelandic Literature' (University of Glasgow, 2010), 74.

²⁸ Vohra, 2016, 208.

²⁹ Mclennan, 70.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 70-71.

³¹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch55.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch34.

bearers are doing as the law requires and the farmer is hindering that. The societal and legal infractions of the farmer lead to Thorgunna's appearance. And it works, as Thorgunna's ghost frightens the farmer so much he offers the hospitality due to the corpse-bearers and Thorgunna walks out and does not rise again.

CHRISTIANITY

While all the sagas I am dealing with straddle the conversion period, there is a clear Christian bias towards the characters who have converted. This is unsurprising as the sagas were written down in a time when Iceland was vehemently Christian. The purpose of the revenants in the *Vinland Sagas* is to contrast Christianity and paganism. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, Thorstein Eiriksson returns to reassure his wife that he has gone to a good resting place (heaven?) and to tell her a prophecy of her future, which includes her taking holy orders and dying in a church she builds on her farm. In the *Saga of Eirik the Red*, Thorstein claims that god has allowed him to return: "It is God's will that I be granted an exception for this brief time to improve my prospects."³⁴ He criticises how Christianity has been practised in Greenland, especially the burial practices, and requests that he and his companions have Christian burials in a church. He also asks Gudrid to donate their money to a church. His return serves as a lesson in how a proper Christian should act, as he comes back to improve his chances in the afterlife, which he does by donating money to the church and poor and making sure his body is treated correctly.

In the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, after death Grimhlid sits up and tries to put her shoes on while in *Eirik the Red's Saga* Sigrid tries to get into bed with Thorstein Eiriksson. Grimhlid is stopped by the mere return of her husband to the room while Thorstein the Black stops Sigrid with an axe to the chest. Neither Grimhlid or Sigrid speak, marking them as different than Thorstein Eiriksson at once and demonstrating their return as unnatural. Thorstein Eiriksson has been given more time by God to speak to his wife, which he does and then sinks back down leaving the world at the right time. Grimhlid and Sigrid do not seem to accept that their time is up, their return is unnatural and characterised by their inability to speak and their slow, uncoordinated movements.³⁵ The death and 'otherness' of the pagan revenants separates them from society while Thorstein can still communicate and interact, making a statement about Christianity's place in the community.

The other revenants carry more subtle messages about religion. Glam is resolutely pagan and his death occurs on Christmas eve after he does not fast as is 'proper for Christian men.'³⁶ He responds derisively, doubting the power of superstitions and compounding the insult with the statement: "The ways of men seemed to me better when they were called heathen."³⁷ Glam's body mysteriously disappears when a priest arrives and grows so heavy when people try to move it to bury it in a church that he ends up covered with stones where he lies. Glam's refusal to obey the rules of the community and religion appears to directly cause his death, as the last thing he does is mock Christianity and its customs. This is underlined by Thorgaut, the replacement shepherd that Glam murders. Thorgaut is Christian and though he dies in exactly the same way as Glam, he allows himself to be buried in the church and the author makes a point of saying that Thorgaut did not haunt with Glam and lies peacefully.

Thorgunna arrives in Iceland already Christian and at her death she predicts the seat of the first native Icelandic bishop. Her request for a Christian burial occurs just before her death along with her request that her bed-hangings be burnt. Though the journey to Skalholt with Thorgunna's body is extremely difficult, it is made clear that this is entirely due to nature rather than supernatural means, like Thorolf earlier in the story or Glam in *Grettis Saga*. Ian Wyatt has compellingly argued that the author of *Eyrbyggja Saga* emphasises the bad weather, high rivers, and tough travelling conditions that the corpse-bearers had to battle,

³⁴ *Eirik the Red's Saga*, trans. Keneva Kunz (New York: Penguin Group inc., 2000) ch6.

³⁵ *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, ch5 and *Eirik the Red's Saga*, ch6.

³⁶ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 1929, ch32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

making the pause in the journey a natural one and disassociating Thorgunna from the other revenants.³⁸ The illnesses and hauntings that follow are then due to the rest of the household not obeying Thorgunna's wishes, as they stop when Thorgunna's bed-linens are finally burnt, and therefore not following the rules of society. In order to make sure that the ghosts are finally gone after the bed-linens are burnt and the door court has been held, Kjartan and Snorri the Priest carry relics and holy water to every corner of the house in order to cleanse it.

JUDGING A BOOK BY IT'S COVER

Appearance is not overly focused on in the sagas and there is no description of the appearance of the revenants, alive or dead, in either of the *Vinland Sagas*. Much of the time someone will be described as beautiful or striking and not much else. So, when appearance is described in some detail, it is doubly significant. Thorolf, Thorgunna, Glam, and Hrapp are all described as large, intimidating people. Their very physicality seems to mark them out as different. Thorgunna especially is tall and broadly built and described as 'massive.'³⁹ Thorgunna's appearance and demeanour at once mark her out as 'unfeminine', her outward appearance signifying her 'otherness'. Thorolf Twist-Foot walks with a limp that he gained through violence, and Hrapp is a big, strong man who likes to throw his weight around. Glam's appearance is especially disconcerting, with his 'wolf grey hair' and large grey eyes.⁴⁰ The word *vargr* (wolf) and compounds like *vargdropi* (wolf-born) is used in the *Grágás* concerning outlaws, serving to emphasise the criminal's alienation from land and society through their association with wolves.⁴¹ Glam's appearance resembling a wolf is a mark of his separation from society. After death their difference is accentuated by extreme growth and their skin turning blue or black like Glam and Thorolf. Their appearance marks the future revenants out as 'other' even before they die.

Their off-putting appearance seems to also indicate their disagreeable personalities. Thorgunna is proper but cannot hold a conversation, Thorolf is violent and can't control his emotions, and Hrapp is an outlaw and a bully. Both Thorolf and Hrapp are dissatisfied with their power and properties in life and they refuse to let go in death. The very nature of a revenant is greed, as they refuse to leave the world of the living and what they had there. They haunt the properties that they owned while alive and try to stop anyone else from living and thriving there. Hrapp wants to be buried upright in the doorway so that he can 'keep a watchful eye on [my] home.'⁴² Even Thorgunna, though she shares out the rest of her belongings and gives a good reason for the burning of her bed-clothes, is described as selfish by Thurid.⁴³ Their physical features and demeanour show their inability to fit in with the community and foreshadows their later incarnations.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

DECOMPOSITION AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN BODY

When Thorolf is disinterred the first time his body is described as 'uncorrupted and very ugly looking.'⁴⁴ The second time it is again uncorrupted but this time also 'black as death and swollen to the size of an ox.'⁴⁵ Thorolf had been buried for at least half a year before the first reburial and for several years before the second. His lack of decomposition is clearly

³⁸ Wyatt, 'The Landscape of the Icelandic Sagas: Text, Place and National Identity', *Landscapes*, 5 (2004), 65.

³⁹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch50.

⁴⁰ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 1929, ch32.

⁴¹ Vohra, 2016, 207.

⁴² *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 1929, ch17.

⁴³ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, ch34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, ch63.

unnatural and disconcerting, especially for the early Icelanders who would have been much more familiar with the process than the average person nowadays. Human decomposition begins four minutes after death and is usually described in four stages: autolysis, bloat, active decay and skeletonization.⁴⁶ Autolysis begins immediately after death and excess carbon dioxide leads to an acidic environment and the break-down of membranes and cells. Additionally, rigor mortis sets in causing the muscles to stiffen. Bloating caused by the build-up of gases leads to the body expanding, sometimes to double its size. Sulphur compounds released by bacteria also cause the discolouration of the skin. Active decay is the organs, muscles and skin liquefying and the soft tissue decomposing, leaving only the hair, bones, and cartilage, and ending with skeletonization.⁴⁷ The corpse has then become something no longer resembling anything alive and has completed its natural journey. All this, hidden in the grave, is the accepted and expected cycle. But when the corpse does not decay and instead leaves the grave, drawing attention to that fact, it is acting as 'other' and defying the natural order. Though some descriptions of the revenants could be seen as the natural stages of decomposition, like the colour change of Thorolf and Glam, and the swelling of Glam to an incredible size, along with these descriptions we are told they are perfectly preserved, indicating that these physical changes are not anything nearly as natural as decomposition.

There are burial practices designed to prevent the return of revenants, from deposition outside the community or in water,⁴⁸ to being buried face-down so that the ghost will only dig deeper into the ground.⁴⁹ Placing stones on the neck or in the mouth of a body has been interpreted as an attempt to stop the deceased from becoming a revenant.⁵⁰ Decapitated burials, sometimes with the head placed between the legs, are often found in Poland, which is the way that Grettir disposes Glam in chapter thirty-five.⁵¹ Deviant burials like these serve to mark the 'otherness' of the supposed revenant and separate them from the rest of the community.

The most sure-fire way to destroy a revenant though, is through cremation. Though Grettir cuts the head off Glam and places it between his legs, Thorhall will not let that be enough and additionally burns Glam down to 'cold cinders' which he places in a skin and then buries in a 'place far from the haunts of man or beast.'⁵² The illness and hauntings that began with Thorgunna's death only end through a combination of burning her bed-hangings and a law court, banishing the dead from the hall. In *Eirik the Red's Saga*, Thorstein Eiriksson orders that the body of Gardi, the first to die, should be burned on a pyre instead of buried with the rest of them as it is his fault that the hauntings started, separating him from the rest of the community. Hrapp's hauntings are eventually stopped when Olaf the Peacock has him disinterred and cremated and his ashes taken out to sea. Cremation is presented as a last resort and atypical (at least in the sagas), separating the revenants from the rest of the community even in their burial method.

Original iconography of the *danse macabre* and the three living/three dead motif did not depict skeletons, instead the figures were corpses in the middle of decomposition, sometimes with worms and insects at work or with the skin burst over entrails.⁵³ The discomfort of these images and with the stories themselves reveals the same kind of attitudes as those towards revenants. The revenants no longer belong in the world of the living but they will not give it up. Once the decomposition of the body is complete, there is no more danger of it becoming a revenant. We can see this embodied in Norse mythology when, after eating, Thor instructs

⁴⁶ 'Human decomposition', <https://www.aftermath.com/content/human-decomposition> [accessed 11/05/2018]

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Caciola, 'Wraiths, Revenants and Ritual in Medieval Culture', *Past & Present*, 152 (1996), 30.

⁴⁹ Simpson, 'Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England [1]', *Folklore*, 114 (2003), 390.

⁵⁰ Gardęła and Kajkowski, 'Vampires, Criminals or Slaves? Reinterpreting "Deviant Burials" in Early Medieval Poland', *World Archaeology*, 45 (2013), 789.

⁵¹ Ibid, 782.

⁵² *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 1929, ch35.

⁵³ Caciola, 2003, 25-26.

his companions to place the bones of the goats back in the skins so that he can bless and revive them in the morning.⁵⁴ The flesh holds some kind of vitality that, while it remains, carries the danger of becoming a revenant. This is probably why the uncorrupted state of Thorolf and Glam is so disconcerting; they have not started decomposing and it is unclear if they ever will, allowing them to stay and haunt indefinitely. Sometimes even cremation is not enough however, as with Thorolf Twist-Foot who is reincarnated as the bull Glæsir when his ashes are licked up by one of Thorodd's oxen. Clearly the additional disposal of the ashes is also required for the worst offenders so that there is nothing at all for them to inhabit.

DON'T GO OUTSIDE

The revenants almost always appear at night and outside the house. They are often heard riding the roof of the hall and tearing about the farm. After Thorolf's death in *Eyrbyggja Saga* 'after sunset no-one out of doors was left in peace.'⁵⁵ Glam is said to walk day and night but people are especially wary of going out at night, and refuse to search for Thorgaut's body and 'trust themselves into the power of trolls in the night.'⁵⁶ During his fight with Glam, Grettir does not want to be pulled outside as he knows the fight will be worse for him. And it is, as Glam is able to look at the moon and curse him before Grettir cuts off his head. When Gudrun and Sigrid go together to the outhouse during the night, they are confronted by the revenants and Sigrid sees herself among them.⁵⁷ In chapter twenty-four of *Laxdæla Saga*, the farmhand refuses to go to the milking shed, located in the forest away from the farmhouse, in the evening because Hrapp will be there. Often the first people to be attacked are the shepherds and people who work on the outskirts of the community. The revenants are the manifestation of the 'otherness' and danger of the outside. Just like in Beowulf and other Germanic literatures, the hall is a place of safety from the supernatural world.

With this in mind, the doorway itself is a liminal space and is a boundary to the unknown. Grettir first sees Glam in the doorway and then struggles on the threshold during the fight. Hrapp appears to Olaf and the farmhand standing in the doorway of the cowshed. The door is the border and controls the access between the inside and outside of the inhabited space. In her 2013 article, Marianne Eriksen argues that crossing the threshold and leaving the 'safety' of the inhabited space is recognised in both ritual and language as a transition from one social role to another.⁵⁸ The power of the doorway is recognised in law as well, as the ghosts in *Eyrbyggja Saga* are banished at a door-court. Summoned to the front door of the hall and banished from the social space of the living, they then leave through another door. The doorways act as a threshold between the world of the living and the supernatural, banishing the ghosts from the community.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation I have presented some of the ways in which revenants are representative of social discord. Thorolf, Thorgunna, Glam, and Hrapp are social outcasts in life and remain so in death. Their appearance and attitude marks them as 'other' even before they die, as does their nationality. There is a clear bias characterising those with a Norwegian background, which is then mirrored in the *Grágás*. The appearance of the revenants gives away their 'otherness' in life and after death as their bodies reject the natural process of decomposition and so they must be destroyed through cremation, setting them apart from the community in another way. They manifest when the laws and rules of the community have

⁵⁴ Sturluson, 1995, 38.

⁵⁵ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, 1973, ch34.

⁵⁶ *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, 1929, ch33.

⁵⁷ *Eirik the Red's Saga*, 2000, ch6.

⁵⁸ Eriksen, 'Doors to the Dead. The Power of Doorways and Thresholds in Viking Age Scandinavia', *Archaeological Dialogues*, 20 (2013), 188.

been ruptured or ignored, not just by themselves but by others as well and they serve as a lesson on the consequences of such. Thorstein Eiriksson and Grimhild/Sigrid represent the disharmony of the conversion period and interactions between Christians and pagans, and the superiority of the new religion. After death the mere presence of the revenants is disruptive and can only be fixed by resolution of the conflict or by complete destruction of the corpse. The ghosts haunt the night outside the safety of the hall, representing the danger posed by the unknown and the space beyond the threshold. Revenants are the ultimate manifestation of fear of the 'other' both in the natural and supernatural community.

There are more aspects of the revenants and 'other' I did not manage to mention, including their connection to magic and prophecy, and trolls and the supernatural. Targeting of animals and shape-changing is a key aspect of the revenants also and something I think would be valuable to examine. Additionally, I would have liked to do a more in-depth analysis of appearance as a marker of 'otherness', the fear of the outside and the concept of riding the roof. Finally, I think my dissertation would have benefitted from a further linguistic study of the words used for the revenants before and after death and their connotations. Unfortunately, my understanding of Old Norse is not yet developed enough to do that justice.

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