

The Role of the Dead in Medieval Iceland: A Case Study of *Eyrbyggja saga*¹

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In this article I intend to discuss the role of the malevolent restless dead in medieval Iceland by making a case study of the so-called wonders of Fróðá, the *Fróðárundr* episode in *Eyrbyggja saga*. In general, for the living such creatures seem to be a source of various forms of malice and fear. They can make people lose their minds, become ill or even die. Their strength often exceeds that of the living, but it is not limitless, and is always ultimately challenged and conquered by the hero, who with great strength and skill banishes the monster for good. In earlier research the living dead have often been considered a part of the natural world of medieval people, something they really believed in, but more recent scholars give the restless dead mythic and symbolic functions, or interpret them as representatives of heathenism portrayed as the counterpart of Christianity.²

In this article, I will examine further the possible symbolic functions and meanings of the restless dead in medieval Iceland in the light of *Eyrbyggja saga*. I will argue that the role of the ghosts in the *Fróðárundr* is to represent social disequilibria caused by diverse psychosocial conflicts present in the society in question, and thus offer a discourse on various moral issues. In *Eyrbyggja saga*'s case, these clashes concern failures to follow certain sexual norms, and the psychosocial problems that have resulted from this, such as the birth of offspring with indeterminate status.

My analysis presupposes that the restless dead are not necessarily understood as 'real' by the medieval readers and writers of the sagas, though I do not deny the

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² See Dubois 1999: 84–91; Ellis 1977; Ellis Davidson 1981; Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983; Lindow 1986; Martin 2005; Odner 1992; Tulinius 1999; Vésteinn Ólason 2003.

possibility that some, or even most, medieval people took the ghosts to be real. It is also possible that they belonged to the *social reality* of medieval Icelandic people: that is, they were beings that could not be observed through the senses, and were therefore not objective, but in which thirteenth-century Icelandic society held a firm belief.³ However, since the readers of the sagas consisted of various social groups, while the writers were a more or less educated literary elite that was familiar with Christian exegetical techniques and the intertextual nature of Skaldic kennings, we may assume that various interpretations and readings of saga texts – including symbolic ones – existed already in the Middle Ages.⁴ It is thus probable that there were various interpretations of the saga ghost-scenes, both literal and symbolic.

Another view supporting my approach is the observation that diverse saga genres do seem to display varying attitudes towards phenomena that we would define as fantastic – that is, containing unrealistic elements – or supernatural, referring to things that may still be real connected with unknown forces and impossible to explain by natural laws, the essence of which is material in the sagas.⁵ Sagas describing events that take place in the distant past or in faraway places, such as the *formaldarsögur*, or *Íslendingasögur* situated in places medieval Icelanders saw as distant or isolated, seem to contain more monstrous and unrealistic creatures than sagas situated in Iceland or occurring in times closer to the time of writing. In fact, according to medieval philosophy, existing “far away, not here” guaranteed the monstrous beings their real existence, which could not

³ Compare Hall 2007: 9. It also has to borne in mind that there is a strong similarity between the medieval Icelandic belief in ghosts and later Icelandic folklore. See Vésteinn Ólason 2003: 161, and compare, e.g. Jón Arnason, Árni Böðvarsson & Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1980–86. I am very grateful to Arngrímur Vídalín Stefánsson for the information he supplied on this issue.

⁴ Compare Clover 1985: 268 and 270–271; Johansen 2002: 49–67; Stockwell 2002; Tulinius 2001: 193–198. Medieval people in general were used to recognizing and interpreting symbolism (e.g. Gurevich 1985: 59–60 and 82–84), and similar mechanisms of understanding have been shown to exist in medieval Iceland as well. See Einar Pálsson 1998; Mundal 1997; Tulinius 2001. On the intellectual capacities required for the interpretation of symbols and allegories, see e.g. Stockwell 2002: 96–98 and 106–107.

⁵ Compare also MacDonald 1981: 202–203, where he writes that for medieval and early modern people the distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘supernatural’ in the modern sense was not clear, yet he does not regard the latter as having been a natural part of their culture. He argues that medieval and early modern people ascribed their undesirable feelings and deeds to the Devil and thus attributed them to supernatural forces. The Devil and demonic spirits became part of the popular psychology, and the language was also affected, hence the distinction between metaphor and reality became blurred. For this reason, MacDonald finds it only natural that people could actually discover “visible proof of the presence of the unseen world”.

be empirically tested.⁶ Accordingly the temporally more distant *Íslendingasögur* seem to contain more ghosts than the *samtíðarsögur*. The value of stories with aspects of unreality as entertainment was acknowledged, sometimes explicitly, in the *Íslendingasögur* where they occurred. Moreover, the restless dead in *Íslendingasögur*, which belong more to the realm of the supernatural than to the fantastic,⁷ would fit into the medieval category of monsters: like monsters, they were situated in an extrageographical locus, since they dwelt in the otherworld, just as unreachable for the living as the faraway lands of monsters. Like the abodes of the monsters mentioned by Williams, this otherworld was supraspatial, allowing its residents to be “simultaneously participating in the material and spiritual worlds and thus forming a bridge between the two”;⁸ no longer present in the realm of the living, but entering it in physical form, as the corpses of their formerly living selves. The monster’s participation in both the material and spiritual worlds also made it a proper tool for allegories, just as I suggest the restless dead were in medieval Iceland. In medieval Europe, at least, this role was a rather rewarding one for the monster, since belief in the physical existence of grotesque monsters did not diminish their symbolic value, and both functions coexisted side by side.⁹

In sagas, as in other medieval literature, there was also often a didactic and moralistic purpose. It has been pointed out that sagas seem to convey, at least implicitly, tales with moral overtones. For society, sagas also offered a chance to negotiate and understand better contemporary, thirteenth-century events and issues by processing them through history.¹⁰ In addition to this, the close relationship with the myths made possible the mythical aspects of the sagas, where myth discussed and presented culturally important aspects of life, even taboos, thus giving the stories additional meanings.¹¹ In sagas the restless dead as symbols may thus have offered a way to talk about various issues that people in those times found important and troubling, but could not necessarily discuss in any other way.

After a brief summary of the *Fróðárundr* episode, bearing the above issues in mind, I will consider the circumstances in which marvels arise and the executive

⁶ Williams 1996: 14.

⁷ Compare Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 209–210; Sävborg 2009: 325, 341 and 344–347; Tulinius 1999: 287.

⁸ Williams 1996: 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*: 11–14 and 76–77.

¹⁰ Compare Axel Kristinsson 2003; Byock 2004; Clover 1985: 267–271; Jaeger 1985; Lönnroth 1989; Tulinius 2002: 39–43.

¹¹ See Clunies Ross 1998: 12–13; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 324–327; Odner 1992: 129; Tulinius 2002: 42.

powers that bring about the restlessness of the dead. Secondly, I will discuss the relationship of the ghost-banishing hero with the restless dead. After this, I will examine the aims and goals of the dead further, and the response of the living to these claims. Bearing in mind the conventional nature of symbols and the difficulties this causes for a historian who is studying symbols of a time and place several hundred years ago, I will study the meanings of the restless dead by reading my main source intertextually with other contemporary Icelandic texts, and by paying attention to the context of the saga itself.¹² Although, as one of the *Íslendingasögur*, *Eyrbyggja saga* purports to tell of events that took place in tenth- and eleventh-century Iceland, I regard it as a source that tells more about the time and culture when it was produced, that is, thirteenth-century Iceland, when Christianity had permeated Icelandic culture for over two centuries.

The Main Sources: *Eyrbyggja saga* and the *Fróðárundr*

Eyrbyggja saga has survived in three different versions. The so-called *Vatnshyrna* manuscript from the fourteenth century was lost in the Copenhagen fire in 1728, but paper copies of the text have survived. Part of another version has survived in a fourteenth-century manuscript in the Wolfenbüttel library in Germany (Wolfenbüttel, Cod. Guelf. 9.10. 4to), and fragments of a thirteenth-century manuscript, AM 162 E fol., related to it and containing part of the *Fróðárundr* episode, also survive. In addition to this, there are fragments of a third version, the earliest of these in a fourteenth-century manuscript, *Melabók* (AM 445 b, 4to). As for the dating of the saga, the text goes back to the middle of the thirteenth century, before the year 1262, when the Icelanders came under the rule of the Norwegian king.¹³ I will primarily use the text available in the *Íslensk Fornrit* edition series, which is based mainly on the paper copies AM 448 4to and AM 442 4to of the *Vatnshyrna* manuscript, but follow also the other versions of the saga. The *Vatnshyrna* manuscript as a whole seems to have contained a surprising number of sagas with supernatural motifs,¹⁴ thus offering a source the contents of which may have been intended to switch on a 'supernatural symbolism' interpretation scheme.¹⁵

According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, the *Fróðárundr* takes place immediately after the Christian faith has arrived in Iceland, around the year 1000. In the summer when

¹² Compare Tulinius 2001: 214.

¹³ Matthías Þórðarson 1935: lvii–lxii; McCreesh 1993: 174; Scott 2003: 1*–27*.

¹⁴ Compare Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007: 412–413.

¹⁵ Compare Stockwell 2002.

the new faith has been established at the *Alþingi*, a ship from Dublin arrives at Snæfellsnes, bringing with it people from Ireland and the Hebrides (*Suðreyjar*). Among them is a woman from the Hebrides called Þórgunna, who has lots of precious things with her. She is obviously a woman of wealthy origin, and her belongings attract the interest of the mistress of the house at Fróðá, Þuríðr. Þórgunna accepts her invitation to stay at Fróðá, but does not want to sell off her precious bedclothes to Þuríðr, although she is keen to buy them.¹⁶

As the summer passes, Þórgunna does her own share of the work at the farm, but later falls ill and dies. On her deathbed, she asks the master of the house, Þóroddr skattkaupandi, to burn all her precious bedclothes to ashes, in order to prevent any harm to the living. She wants him to keep some valuable things to cover his expenses, but gives her precious scarlet mantle to Þuríðr. When Þórgunna has died, Þuríðr nevertheless persuades her husband to save some of Þórgunna's bed furnishings.¹⁷

When her body is taken for burial Þórgunna appears as a restless corpse to prepare food for its carriers, but does not walk again after her body has been laid to rest in the consecrated ground at Skálholt. However, at the Fróðá farm weird phenomena appear during the winter. An *urðarmáni*, a moon of destiny portending death, is seen on the inner wall of the house on the same evening as the corpse-bearers of Þórgunna's body have returned to the farm. The same light appears every evening for a whole week, and after this a strange disease kills six people at Fróðá, all of whom become restless after their deaths. This causes people great fear and horror. Moreover, people are astonished by a strange noise from the storeroom that is filled with dried fish, but when they attempt to find its source they cannot see any living thing.¹⁸

Soon after the noises from the storage room, the master of the house goes out to Ness to get more dried fish. In the evening, after Þóroddr has left, a being in the shape of a seal rises up through the floor and reaches out for Þórgunna's bedclothes (*gægðisk upp á ársalinn Þórgunnu*). No one is capable of driving it away but young Kjartan, the son of the house, who hits it with a sledgehammer several times until it sinks into the ground again.¹⁹

Meanwhile, on his trip, Þóroddr is drowned together with all those on his boat, six in all. As a funerary feast is held for the deceased, Þóroddr and the others who were drowned appear in the house, and thereafter make a habit of warming themselves by the fire every evening. Although this had seemed a good omen during

¹⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 137–139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 139–143.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 143–147.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 147.

the feast, the return of the dead every evening, accompanied by the ones who have died of the disease, causes everyone fear, but on the third evening Kjartan finds a solution to the problem. Two fires are made, one for the dead and one for the living. In the meantime the noises from the storage room increase in volume until the source of this is finally seen: an ox-like tail with a seal's skin. People try to pull it out, but while doing this, the tail escapes from them and rips the skin from their hands. When they examine the fish, they find out that it has all been destroyed.²⁰

As the winter goes on, another six people die and the mistress of the house falls ill as well. Kjartan travels to his maternal uncle Snorri goði to ask for advice. Snorri sends Kjartan back together with a priest, his own son Þórðr kausi, and six other people. He tells them to burn the bedclothes of Þórgunna, sing Masses to the dead, consecrate the place with holy water, have people confess their sins and summon all the dead to a door-court (*duradómur*). All this is done and the farm is finally cleansed of the restless dead and the lethal disease. Even the mistress of the house, Þuríðr, fully recovers from her sickness. After this it is told that Kjartan runs the farm with success for the rest of his life.²¹

The Will of the Dead

As the summary shows, the people at Fróðá farm are harassed not just by one, but several restless dead in their physical bodies, and a seal-like being that reaches for the bedclothes of the deceased Þórgunna and destroys the dried fish. I will begin by studying the circumstances in which the restless dead operate, and the executive power that may be behind the appearance of so many ghosts.

Arnved Nedkvitne has pointed out that the restless dead in sagas are usually described as actors that do their evil deeds out of malice and of their own free will.²² With such large groups of restless dead as those in the *Eyrbyggja saga* episode, it is meaningful to ask whose will drives them on. It has been suggested that the wonders of Fróðá have Þórgunna as their executive power, though opinions on this vary.²³ However, it does seem that Þórgunna is heavily involved.

Þórgunna appears as a living dead being during the transport of her body to Skálholt for burial, but after this she does not walk as a living corpse again.²⁴ It is,

²⁰ Ibid.: 148–150.

²¹ Ibid.: 150–152.

²² Nedkvitne 2004: 38–43.

²³ See Ellis Davidson 1981; Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983; Odner 1992.

²⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 143–145.

nevertheless, important to note that Þórgunna *does* show signs of restlessness immediately after her death. Moreover, it is her bedclothes that seem to cause the disease that ravages the folk at Fróðá,²⁵ since their destruction is a crucial factor in the disappearance of the illness, even if the door-court, the Mass, the confessions, the holy water and the relics all contribute to the cure.²⁶

Þórgunna does not appear alongside the other restless dead at Fróðá after her death, but her post-mortal influence seems to take another shape, as the seal-headed creature that rises up through the floor to harass the folk seems to be overtly interested in her remaining bedclothes. It is common for the restless dead in sagas to leave some unresolved things behind them after death,²⁷ and in Þórgunna's case, Þóroddr has not followed her last wish that her precious bedclothes should all be burned.²⁸ The seal thus seems to point quite clearly to the object that is involved in the unfulfilled wishes of the dead woman.

The seal first appears right after Þóroddr has left to get more dried fish and after the noises from the storage room have started to bother people. This noise, as well as the spoiling of the dried fish, seems to be caused by a creature with a seal's skin. Therefore, it seems that a seal-like being is largely responsible for the fear of the people, the destruction of food reserves and, perhaps indirectly, for the drowning of Þóroddr and his crew, who have left to replenish the food stores. The destruction of the dried fish is not noticed before Þóroddr's departure to get more dried fish, but since they are both mentioned in the same chapter it may be appropriate to assume that there is a connection between that and the subsequent noises from the storage room, which "was so full that the door could not be locked" (*var svá fullr, at eigi mátti hurðinni upp lúka*),²⁹ thus probably containing more than enough for the people to eat.

According to Kjartan G. Ottósson, it is probable that the seal-headed creature is responsible for the storm that drowns Þóroddr and his men,³⁰ but this being is not

²⁵ However, see Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 38–41, 45–49 and 54–57 on the underlying causes of the disease. He suggests that some kind of evil power is connected to the bedclothes, but that it is unclear whether the bedclothes cause the disease. He nevertheless admits that the illness can be seen as a punishment for disregarding Þórgunna's last wish: that her bedclothes should all be burned.

²⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 150–152.

²⁷ Vésteinn Ólason 2003: 164–165.

²⁸ Þórgunna does have something else in common with the possible ghost-candidates. Compare Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 137–139; Nedkvitne 2004: 38.

²⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 147.

³⁰ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 85–88. Compare also *ibid.*: 87 and Klare 1933–34: 50, on how the dead have been considered to cause stormy weather.

Þórgunna, since she is buried in consecrated ground in Skálholt and therefore cannot be showing any restlessness at Fróðá farm. The role of the seal, according to him, may merely be to emphasise and remind the reader of the cause of the wonders, that is, neglect of the orders of Þórgunna to burn her bedclothes. He interprets the tail with seal's hair to be that of the Devil, and sees both creatures as omens portending death. Three such omens are thus discovered in the saga, three being a number Kjartan G. Ottósson finds also elsewhere in the *Fróðárundr* story. The moon of destiny, the seal-headed being and the creature with the seal-haired tail each seem to portend the death of six people, although they do not cause the deaths directly.³¹

The role of the seal as the omen of death seems probable, yet it does not exclude Þórgunna's role in the wonders. After all, the tail is thought by people to be 'as if dead' (*skildu menn eigi annat en rófan væri dauð*),³² implying that the creature is connected to the dead. Kjartan G. Ottósson seems to link the two seal-related creatures, since they both sink into the ground, but sees this as a further indication of their connection to evil powers, the Hell and the Devil.³³ However, an underworld origin could equally well connect the seal to the dead, since this refers to the place where the deceased are laid to rest. It is possible that there existed in medieval Iceland a deep connection between the dead, the earth, the Devil and evil (powers) in general, and thus a distinction cannot necessarily be made between them. However, though the tail might be that of the Devil, it is worth asking why it is seal-haired instead of being just an ordinary tail. The seal thus seems to be an important motif, but its connection to Þórgunna still needs further exploration.

In sagas, Christian salvation may not have prevented the dead from asserting their rights,³⁴ and the younger version of *Eyrbyggja saga* found in the fourteenth-century *Melabók* indicates that Þórgunna is capable of expressing restlessness even after her Christian burial. In this text Þórgunna's voice is heard from the grave, complaining about her burial place and saying how it is cold at the feet of Mána-Ljótr.³⁵ The

³¹ See Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 67–69, 80, 85–92 and 102–106, though he admits that Þórgunna and the seal might have been linked in oral tradition.

³² Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 149.

³³ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 90–92 and 102–106. The earth could signify 'evil' in sagas, and could thus be regarded as referring to the Devil. See, e.g. Einar Pálsson 1994: 11–25 and 55. Einar Pálsson also points out that in Ancient Greek thought "Earth is a cube" with six sides, *ibid.*: 10 – an interesting detail in the light of *Fróðárundr* where six people in a row die in three occasions.

³⁴ Martin 2005: 76–77.

³⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935:145. This is then mentioned as a reason why so few loved Þórgunna.

excerpt seems to imply, at least in later tradition, that Þórgunna was attributed post-mortual activity despite her having a proper Christian burial. In light of this too, a connection between the seal and Þórgunna cannot be ruled out, though her possible post-mortual shape-shifting raises some questions.

Its interest in the bedclothes of Þórgunna suggests that this seal-figured monster represents Þórgunna,³⁶ perhaps *her will*. It could be the post-mortual (animal) *fylgja* of Þórgunna,³⁷ though Kjartan G. Ottósson suggests, basing his discussion on Else Mundal's study on *fylgjur*, that this cannot be the case, since unlike animal *fylgjur* in general, it is not immaterial, appearing only in dreams and to people with second vision, or destined to die (*feigr*). According to Mundal, animal *fylgjur* could not belong to dead people either.³⁸ Dag Strömbäck, however, sees animals with material appearance and attached, for instance, to people skilled in witchcraft or capable of changing their shape as *fylgjur*. He also suggests that the dead too could have a *fylgja*, which could have continued its material existence after the death of its host.³⁹ Knut Odner, who sees the seal-*fylgja* as Þórgunna's counterpart in the otherworld, points to the liminal nature of seals: "They are considered liminal in two ways, first because they are more human than other animals, and second because they cross the boundary between land and sea".⁴⁰ This suggests that the dead Þórgunna could

³⁶ Compare also Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 86–87.

³⁷ The seal has been interpreted as Þórgunna's *fylgja* by Odner 1992: 135 and 138, and various others. See Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 89 on this. Another restless dead in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórólfr bægifótr, becomes a bull after his body has been burnt and a cow consumes some of his ashes, giving birth to this ox. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935, 169–176. The bull has not always been interpreted as a *fylgja*, though. See e.g. Ármann Jakobsson 2010: 205 and Vésteinn Ólason 2003: 166, on this point.

³⁸ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 89; Mundal 1974: 38–43.

³⁹ Strömbäck 2000: 165–167. Kjartan G. Ottósson also points out that the seal in *Eyrbyggja saga* might not have a human host, since its eyes are not described as they are in *Laxdæla saga*, where a man (also originating in the Hebrides) appears as a seal after his death and causes a shipwreck. It is mentioned that the seal appeared to have human eyes (*sem mannsaugu væri í honum*), indicating its human origin. Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 91; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 39–41. However, a medieval reader might not have connected a seal in the ocean with post-mortual restlessness of a person, unless it was indicated that it had human eyes. In *Fróðárundr* the relation seems clearer as the seal is showing an interest in the bedclothes that once belonged to Þórgunna, the expected host of the seal. On the connection between *Laxdæla saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga*, see Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 87–88. Both sagas are also included in the *Vatnsþýrna* manuscript.

⁴⁰ Odner 1992: 135 and 138. See also below the chapter "The symbols of Forbidden Sexuality: The Seal".

appear as a seal precisely because she had crossed the border between this and the other world.

Strengthening even further the link between the seal and Þórgunna is the possibility that pagan witchcraft might be involved in the *Fróðárundr*, and in Þórgunna in particular. In *Eyrbyggja saga* she is described as a devoted Christian, but with rather ambivalent characteristics, which show similarities with women skilled in witchcraft.⁴¹ Occult powers could thus enable her to return to Fróðá as a seal.⁴² Although as a seal-headed being she would not be, strictly speaking, a ghost, her function and motivation can be associated with that of the living dead. It is her will that is expressed towards the living when the seal tries to seize the bedclothes that cause the disease at Fróðá, and in addition, though somewhat indirectly, she brings about the drowning of Þóroddr and his crew, both incidents being the cause and condition for the restless dead to appear – to ‘rob people of life and health’ (*firrði menn bæði lífi ok heilsu*).⁴³

To discuss further the motives of Þórgunna’s post-mortal activity, I will next study the relationship between the hero of the *Fróðárundr* episode, young Kjartan, and the executive force of the ghost episode, Þórgunna, and why he takes the role of ghost-banisher.

The Problematic Origins of the Hero

Eyrbyggja saga presents the young son of the house, Kjartan, as the person responsible for banishing the restless dead from the Fróðá farm and protecting the living in various ways, so his character needs further examination. Interestingly, there seems to be a link between Þórgunna’s past deeds and the origins of Kjartan.

In earlier studies, Þórgunna has been identified as the Þórgunna of *Eiríks saga rauða*, whom a man called Leifr Eiríkson from Iceland meets in the Hebrides before his trip to Greenland and who later gives birth to his child. She is of high birth, though no genealogy is given, and the saga mentions that their son Þorgils was in Iceland during the time of the *Fróðárundr*. Given the chronology of the saga, it is, according

⁴¹ Compare Ellis Davidson 1981: 156–157; Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 46–50. For instance, people and animals coming from the Hebrides often seem to have magical skills. Sayers 1997: 47. Witchcraft, however, was not always considered a negative thing. See Odner 1992: 139. The emphasis on Christian aspects might be a later addition made by the Christian writer of the saga. Compare, e.g., Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 54–56.

⁴² Compare *ibid.*: 89–91; Strömbäck 2000: 160–167.

⁴³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 151.

to H. R. Ellis Davidson, more likely that it is Þórgunna herself that would have been in Iceland during that time, as her son seems to have been only an infant.⁴⁴ It is, of course, questionable whether we should trust such saga chronologies. Moreover, Kjartan G. Ottósson has questioned whether both sagas present the same Þórgunna, since in *Eyrbyggja saga* people believe her to be in her fifties, an unlikely candidate for an affair with Leifr and bearer of his child just a short time before.⁴⁵

Before continuing, it is thus reasonable to ask to what extent we should rely merely on the accounts of another saga for the previous existence of an otherwise unknown character such as Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Her son Þorgils, not Þórgunna herself, is mentioned to have been in Fróðá at the time of the wonders in both the *Hauksbók* (14th cent.) and *Skálholtsbók* (15th cent.) versions of *Eiríks saga*, suggesting that the *Es* statement is not simply a scribal error.⁴⁶ The question remains, however, why is Þorgils mentioned in connection with *Fróðárundr* in *Eiríks saga* when he does not appear in *Eyrbyggja saga*? Some connection between the two Þórgunna figures seems to exist.

The answer may be the oral tradition behind both sagas. Gísli Sigurðsson has shown in his studies of events and characters that appear in different sagas how inconsistencies may occur. The names of the characters participating in the events and the genealogies may vary from one saga to another depending on the aim of the text. Characters appearing in different sagas may share some traits but differ in others. Gísli Sigurðsson has suggested that little information on a character appearing in a saga could imply that the readers of the text were expected to have some preliminary knowledge of that person transmitted orally. Since it was based on human memory, the orally transmitted knowledge of characters was fluid and could also be moulded according to the aims and purposes of the writer.⁴⁷ Carol Clover has introduced the term 'immanent whole', that Gísli Sigurðsson defines as "the conceptual saga as it exists as the sum of its parts at the preliterate stage. This

⁴⁴ Ellis Davidson 1981: 156–157. See also Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 209–210, for *Eiríks saga rauða*, and 137, for *Eyrbyggja saga*, and footnote 1 on the same page.

⁴⁵ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983, 52. However, it might be important that according to the saga people *thought* she was in her fifties ([þ]at var áhugi manna, at Þórgunna myndi sótt hafa inn séttu tög), thus indicating that the writer wanted to emphasize that it is an estimate, not a fact. The saga also states that Þórgunna was, despite her age, the most vigorous woman (*var hon þó kona in ernasta*), which might imply that she is more energetic than her estimated age would lead people to expect, or that the writer wanted to make the audience suspect that there is something in her age that does not meet the eye. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 139.

⁴⁶ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 51.

⁴⁷ Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 191–229.

immanent whole is never told in full and exists only in the minds of the members of the traditional culture, and only achieves an integrated form when the story comes to be written".⁴⁸ Information on a character, and thus his or her 'immanent saga', can in some cases be partly reconstructed by examining how the same person is described in other sagas.⁴⁹ Is this possible in Þórgunna's case, then?

Lack of genealogies of the Þórgunnas of both *Eiríks saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* might imply that presenting them was found unnecessary because they were well known, though it is even more likely that these details – if they ever existed – were not given in *Eyrbyggja saga* since Þórgunna was not its main character. She seems to be employed as a tool by the writer to build up a proper ghost story. His aim was not to present a history of this Hebridean person. Moreover, presenting her origins and affairs with Leifr in *Eyrbyggja saga* might have taken away some of the mysterious nature the saga clearly wants to ascribe to her – and made the interpretation of her role discussed further below perhaps too obvious.

To begin with the similarities, in both *Eiríks saga* and *Eyrbyggja saga* there is the motif of some awkward person from the Hebrides staying in Fróðá at the time of the wonders. In *Eiríks saga* it is told that Þorgils was somehow weird (*þótti þar enn eigi kynjalaust um hann verða*),⁵⁰ and the description given of Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga* likewise suggests that there is something mysterious about her. Her rather unsociable character, remarkably large size and obvious affection for the young Kjartan suggest not only that she is witchlike, but also that she is categorised as person with an exceptional appearance and habits which raise suspicion.⁵¹

Though *Eiríks saga* offers Þórgunna a moment in the spotlight, her appearance in the saga is still somewhat odd since she appears not to have any particular role later on. She, a woman skilled in witchcraft (*margkunnigr*), simply announces fate to Leifr: that she will give birth to his son, who will be of no use to his father. Yet the son, Þorgils, plays no part in the saga either. It is merely mentioned that he was at Fróðá during the time of the wonders and was considered weird when with his father later in Greenland.⁵² Neither he nor Þórgunna are mentioned as having any real influence on the main characters of the saga.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 45.

⁴⁹ Compare *ibid.*: 123–250; Gísli Sigurðsson 2007.

⁵⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 210.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*: 139. Compare also Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983, 46–50, 53–54 and 71.

⁵² Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 210. Compare also Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 53–54.

The role of Þórgunna in *Eiríks saga* thus seems to be to give birth to a son who is weird and at Fróðá during the wonders, whereas in *Eyrbyggja saga* she is herself ascribed these characteristics and is held responsible for the subsequent events. There thus seem to be enough similarities to reconstruct the immanent saga of Þórgunna, albeit an inconsistent one. This could be expected since her role in the memorised tales was a minor one: she was a largely unknown character from the Hebrides, she or her son (or both together) possibly said to have stayed at Fróðá at the time when stories about the wonders were born. Knowing this immanent saga, medieval Icelanders may have associated ‘the weird character from the Hebrides’ of *Eiríks saga rauða* with that of *Eyrbyggja saga*, but this interpretation was not made too apparent by explicitly pointing out the connection.

If we examine the part of the immanent saga of Þórgunna told in *Eiríks saga rauða*, the reason why Þórgunna ends up in Iceland after leaving the Hebrides turns out to be her history with Leifr Eiríksson. When Leifr leaves it is Þórgunna’s intention to follow him to Greenland, despite the opposition of her relatives. Leifr does not agree to this, even though Þórgunna tells him about the child she is carrying, because he feels that it is too risky to antagonise her relatives. Þórgunna expresses her intention to send his son to him in Greenland and to travel there herself before she dies. *Eiríks saga* does not tell us any more about the destiny of Þórgunna, but it does mention that her son Þorgils went to Greenland, where Leifr acknowledged that he was his father.⁵³

There is an interesting similarity between the origin of Kjartan and the origin of Þórgunna’s son Þorgils. Firstly, *Eiríks saga* indicates that Þórgunna’s son is not acknowledged by his real father for many years (in his early adulthood) and far from his actual place of birth, in Greenland, so that he lives his early years without receiving this recognition. According to *Eyrbyggja saga*, the origin of Kjartan is similarly ambiguous. The father of Kjartan is not the man who has raised him up (Þóroddr, the master of the house) and he is not born out of a relationship that would be accepted by the relatives. Þóroddr skattkaupandi is the second husband of Þuríðr, the mother of Kjartan and the sister of Snorri goði. Before their marriage, Snorri goði is irritated by the rumour that Björn Ásbrandsson from Kambr, who has the nickname Breiðvíkingakappi, has started to visit his sister at Fróðá after the death of her first husband Þorbjörn digri. He takes his sister to live on his own farm and later lets her remarry and take Þóroddr as her second husband.⁵⁴ Þóroddr and Þuríðr return

⁵³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 209–210.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 33–40 and 55.

to Fróðá, and, despite the presence of the second husband, Björn soon starts paying her visits anew. The saga relates it as common knowledge that the two have an affair. Although Þóroddr tries to prevent them from seeing each other, it is not until Björn is outlawed from Iceland after killing two of Þóroddr's men who have attacked him that he succeeds. In the same summer that Björn sails away from Iceland, Þuríðr gives birth to a son at Fróðá, and he is named Kjartan.⁵⁵ Though Björn visits Iceland later, he does not acknowledge his fatherhood in public, but only in his poetry, and knowledge of his paternity extends only to rumour.⁵⁶

The saga nevertheless makes it quite clear that the real father of Kjartan is Björn Breiðvíkingakappi: in other people's words he is "the son of both Þóroddr and all the others" (*son þeira Þórodds allra saman*),⁵⁷ and his maternal uncle later calls him "Breiðvíkingr", referring to the nickname of Kjartan's real father.⁵⁸ Therefore, like the son of Þórgunna, Kjartan lacks his real father's acknowledgement.

In Kjartan's case this acknowledgement takes place symbolically several years after the wonders of Fróðá, when some Icelanders are shipwrecked on the Irish coast. There they meet Björn Breiðvíkingakappi, who gives them a magnificent sword and asks that it be given to Kjartan, the master of Fróðá.⁵⁹ Here I suggest that the sword can be interpreted as the authentication of Kjartan's genealogical inheritance; acting as the father who supplies his offspring with proper arms in Icelandic culture, Björn equips Kjartan with a precious sword.⁶⁰

The origin of Kjartan is thus a reflection of the past of Þórgunna: her son, just like Kjartan, is born out of a sexual relationship that is neither approved by society nor acknowledged by the male relatives, and both her son and Kjartan grow up without (knowing) their real fathers. The presence of Þórgunna thus seems to indicate her will to reveal the similarities in the origins of both her own son and Kjartan.

The story of Óláfr pá, son of a woman called Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, also supports the idea that questions of origin and the relationship with the father are an important part of the ghost-symbolism. Like Kjartan, Óláfr is born out of a relationship that is not accepted, but is an expression of disapproved sexuality that causes social disequilibrium. He is the son of a slave woman, and he is conceived

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 76–81.

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 107–109.

⁵⁷ Ibid.: 108.

⁵⁸ Ibid.: 155.

⁵⁹ Ibid.: 176–180.

⁶⁰ Compare Poole 2004: 7–8 and 10; Tulinius 1999: 305–307.

when an Icelandic aristocrat Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson buys Melkorka for his pleasure during his trip to Norway⁶¹. Being a son of a slavewoman or concubine was regarded as a degrading thing, and not a reputation that a man would wish to have. This is indicated in *Laxdæla saga* when Melkorka expresses her concern about her son Óláfr's status: "I do not want you to be called a concubine's son any longer" (*Eigi nenni ek at þú sér ambáttarsonr kallaðr lengr*).⁶²

Óláfr's mother later turns out to be the daughter of an Irish king and Óláfr goes to visit his grandfather in Ireland. Óláfr's meeting with the ghost Hrappr is chronologically situated at the time when Óláfr has rediscovered his roots and therefore established his status as a descendant of an Irish king, but has still remained a concubine's son without the right to inherit from his father, Hǫskuldr Dala-Kollsson, a member of the Icelandic aristocracy.⁶³ The ghost is thus encountered by a man with problematic origins involving a tricky relationship with a father, that is, symbolic fatherlessness.⁶⁴

Thus, the *Fróðárundr* in *Eyrbyggja saga* makes concrete and visible the problematic origins of the hero: the fatherhood that has not been acknowledged, his status as the fruit of forbidden sexuality, and the lack of support from the most important male figure in a man's life, the father. In other words, the ghosts and wonders manifest the mental and social disequilibrium inherent in these situations – the reality for a man who is either actually or symbolically without a father, the consequences of this for the order of society and the attitudes taken by the members of it – indicating in a concrete way the shadows of the past, deeds that have caused the balance of the minds of men and the order of their society to be shaken by the dead through fear, lunacy, illness and death. In this emotional reality Kjartan is forced to encounter the monstrous dead.

⁶¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 22–25.

⁶² *Ibid.*: 50.

⁶³ *Ibid.*: 50–51, 56–59, 66–69, and 72–73, footnotes 2–3. Compare also Tulinius 2002: 98–102, on the changes concerning inheritance rights that occurred in thirteenth-century Iceland.

⁶⁴ Supporting this further is an example of another ghost-slayer, Grettir Ásmundarson, who is clearly having a problematic relationship with his father, whose attitudes towards his son do not get any better as the father is about to die. Grettir is thus symbolically without a father, and his battle with the ghost Glámr can be regarded as a symbolical struggle with his own father, as Tulinius 1999: 299–307 has shown.

The Symbols of Forbidden Sexuality: The Seal

Above it has been shown that the restless dead point to the relationship of the ghost-banishing hero with his socially problematic origins, and with his father. Next I will discuss the symbolic meanings of Þórgunna's after-death appearance as a seal-like creature.

In the light of other texts, it seems probable that Þórgunna appears as a seal precisely because her life and the life of those before whom she appears involve some aspects of unapproved sexuality. This is supported by another description of a seal-creature in saga literature, in *Selkollu þáttr*, which was written at approximately the same time as *Eyrbyggja saga* but deals with the life of Guðmundr Arason, who was the bishop in Iceland in Hólar from 1203 to 1237, therefore telling of contemporary events.⁶⁵

Moreover, the theme of the seal appears to belong to a particular area of saga production in Iceland, and even to a particular literary authority. As Tulinius has pointed out in his study, both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Selkollu þáttr* are situated in the same area. The source of *Selkollu þáttr* is mentioned to be "herra Sturla", identified as Sturla Þórðarson, the son of Þórðr Sturluson, whose nephews offered bishop Guðmundr a refuge after he had to flee his own diocese as a result of disagreements with some chieftains. Sturla Þórðarson, as well as his uncle Snorri Sturluson, have been accepted as important figures in thirteenth-century saga writing and, therefore, a dialogical connection with both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Selkollu þáttr* is possible.⁶⁶

In *Selkollu þáttr* the seal-headed woman, Selkolla, is obviously the consequence of an unapproved sexual act: a child that has not been baptized and who becomes inanimate (*dauðr*) and ill-looking (*illiligr*) while the man and woman who are carrying her to the church neglect her for a while and have sex together. Because of its ugliness, they abandon the baby altogether and later a woman with a seal's head is seen in the district. She is thus called Selkolla and engages in inappropriate sexual acts with the bondman Dálkr Þórisson – who is said to be *kvensamr*, 'given to women'. In both cases, the term *leggjast með konu* is used, thus suggesting that an illicit sexual act is performed.⁶⁷

Thus in both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Selkollu þáttr* a seal seems to serve as a sign of forbidden sexuality that has produced illegitimate offspring – that is, children with an indeterminate status – or had other horrifying consequences, such as the death of an unbaptized child.

⁶⁵ Tulinius 2007: 62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*: 62.

⁶⁷ Guðni Jónsson 1948: 494–495; Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1957: 379.

According to *Selkollu þáttr* an unclean spirit is thought to have entered the *búkr* of the child, the trunk without the head, therefore suggesting that the seal's head may actually signify the material presence of this *óbreinn andi*.⁶⁸ The concept of the unclean spirit becomes interesting in the light of a book written by Saint Gregory, *Moralia in Iob*, the Latin version of which appears in an inventory list of Hólar cathedral.⁶⁹ According to *Moralia*, “unclean spirits...inflamm[e] the pure thoughts of our mind with the burning of sexual desire”.⁷⁰ As Hólar was also the seat of Bishop Guðmundr Arason, whose connection with the sagas through Sturla has been mentioned above, it seems fruitful to examine the episode in the light of *Moralia* as well. In Gregory's text, the unclean spirit is the subject that causes sexual desire through inflammation of the thoughts. Here, too, the unclean spirit is something that comes from outside of the body, and in both *Moralia* and *Selkollu þáttr* this unclean spirit is more or less entangled with sexuality. I take this link as another supporting factor for the argument that seals and seals' heads (as unclean spirits) are connected with sexuality, or, to be more exact, excessive and disapproved sexual desire. Rather than portending the future, as many supernatural and fantastic creatures do, the seal as a symbol seems to refer to sexual offences in the past, to acts that have already taken place but continue to influence the present of those involved.

In *Laxdæla saga*, on the other hand, it is not made explicit whether the seal that Þorsteinn surtr and his folk see before dying in a shipwreck was connected to Hrappr,⁷¹ the deceased (originally Hebridean) husband of Þorsteinn's sister who had already shown restlessness after his death, or whether the seal in this case might be indicating disapproved sexuality. However, some time after the seal episode young Óláfr pá moves to Hrappr's old farm, where Hrappr continues to walk restlessly until the new owner banishes him. In this case, the seal does not appear to Óláfr, the consequence of an unapproved sexual affair, whereas Hrappr in his ghost-body does.⁷² Nevertheless, the occurrence in the same saga of both the seal episode and the theme

⁶⁸ Selkolla is also called a *fjandi* that maimed men. Guðni Jónsson 1948: 494–495. In *Íslendinga saga* Selkolla is introduced as an ogre or giantess (*flagð*). Guðbrand Vigfusson 1878: 223.

⁶⁹ Wolf 2001: 269.

⁷⁰ [I]mmundi spiritus...[s]aepe enim mundas mentis nostrae cogitationes ardore libidinis accendunt, in Gillet and de Gaudemaris 1975: 232, trans. Barbara H. Rosenwein in Rosenwein 2006: 82. In *Moralia*, the unclean spirits are said to have fallen from the ethereal heaven and to be wandering in the air, cast down because of their pride.

⁷¹ See, however, Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 87–88.

⁷² Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1934: 19–20, 39–42 and 66–69.

of illicit sexuality linked to the past of the ghost-slayer Óláfr þá implies that a certain connection exists between these two motifs.

The seal symbolism in *Eyrbyggja saga* thus appears to point, in a Christian moral sense, to the tendencies, of the people involved in the *Fróðárundr*, Þuríðr in particular, to succumb to the sins of the flesh.⁷³ Like Eve in the story of the Fall of Man, she has coveted the precious bedclothes of Þórgunna,⁷⁴ that is, things that do not belong to her, just as she longed for Björn. The seal's head, like the restless dead, harasses all the people on the farm, thus representing the consequences of Þuríðr's 'sinfulness' in her past – namely her relationship with Björn and its consequence, Kjartan – as a source of trouble to the whole of society.

The Establishment of the (New) Order

Þórgunna's post-mortem appearance as a seal-like creature thus emphasises the role of the deceased as indicators of socially unacceptable deeds that affect the whole of society, the order of which is then shaken. However, Þórgunna is not simply enacting a masterplan of her own, even though she seems to act as the *primus motor* of all events. Rather, the dead at Fróðá farm work as a collective team.

The aims and goals of the restless dead, alongside the responses of the living to their claims will now be discussed further. Þórgunna is not the only one with unresolved concerns, nor is she, in the disguise of a seal, alone in haunting the farm, as the large group of restless dead in their human corpses also give the living their share of problems. Vésteinn Ólason has suggested that those living dead which appear in groups could also be considered as being possessed by some other external power, acting their part in the

⁷³ Compare also later Folklore stories of Selchies, the seal people, where sealmen and -women have relationships with humans, the theme thus being that of 'un-matched couples', in Thomson 1954. With regard to the illicit sexuality theme, the scarlet mantle Þórgunna gives to Þuríðr on her deathbed, the *skarlatsskikkja*, is interestingly reminiscent of the *skikkja* in one of the *riddarasögur*, *Möttuls saga*, in which a mantle that reveals unfaithful women is brought to king Artús. Kalinke 1999a: 12–28. The saga was translated in Norway during the reign of King Hákon Hákonarson (1217–1263), whose biographical saga was written by Sturla Þórðarson soon after Hákon's death. Kalinke 1999b; Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007: 146. It is therefore possible that the motif of 'magic mantle' entered Icelandic literature through Sturla, a result of his contacts with Norway. The question then arises whether the purpose of the *skarlatsskikkja* – skarlat being known as a valuable, even luxurious material in Medieval Iceland – in *Eyrbyggja saga* is to point to Þuríðr's 'infidelity'. Compare, however, Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 46.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: 55–56.

league of the main ghost as innocent victims.⁷⁵ I do agree that the victims of Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga* can perhaps be regarded as such, as they show up with him occasionally and are not mentioned by name when appearing as restless dead.⁷⁶ Most of the restless dead at Fróðá are also like this, but I think it important here that three of them are given a face, a voice and a name in the *Fróðárundr* episode.

This can be seen especially in the scene of Kjartan's door-court, when he uses the law to banish the ghosts from the farm, along with the help of some Christian rituals and the burning of the bedclothes of Þórgunna. At this moment, four of the eighteen living dead state their opinions and three of them are mentioned by name. Firstly, there is Þorgríma galdrakinn, who is skilled in witchcraft and whom Þórgunna did not get along with. Secondly, there is the husband of the former, Þórir viðleggr, and thirdly the deceased master of the house, Þóroddr. Being evicted like this is unpleasant for them, but they are obliged to go and finally agree to leave.⁷⁷ The naming of these three restless dead suggests that they have a special role in the wonders along with Þórgunna, since the marvels do not cease until both they and Þórgunna in her seal-form are banished.

Recognition of the link between Þórgunna and Kjartan provided by unapproved sexuality and questions of origin leads to another interesting connection between Kjartan and the three restless dead who make their presence felt in the saga, this being through Kjartan's real father. Þóroddr skattkaupandi is the third member in the triangle of passion, the man who has brought up Kjartan, but who has the real father Björn Breiðvíkingakappi as the object of his ill will. In addition to this, the sons of Þorgríma galdrakinn and Þórir viðleggr, Örn and Valr, are the men that Björn Breiðvíkingakappi kills when he is ambushed by men from Þóroddr's farm.⁷⁸

Therefore, Kjartan is bound to the restless dead by bonds of blood, by the actions performed by his real father in a culture of honour and blood feud. His real father has offended the honour of the man who has brought up Kjartan and whose property he inherits, and killed the sons of Þorgríma galdrakinn and Þórir viðleggr. This may even explain Kjartan's need to use legal measures, the door-court, to banish the restless dead. Kjartan needs the law to solve the conflict with them because in real life such disagreements could also create the need to use legal procedures and negotiations.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Vésteinn Ólason 2003: 165.

⁷⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 93–94.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: 151–152.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*: 77–80.

⁷⁹ On how the dead participate in the social conventions of the living in sagas, see also Martin 2005: 75–81.

Kjartan has the power of the law on his side: as a result of his acts, the harassment by the restless dead is condemned and they are forced to leave against their wills - “after having been allowed to sit here as long as we may” ([s]etit er nú, meðan sætt er), as Þórir viðleggr puts it, or, in the words of Þorgríma galdrakinn, “after staying here as long as we could” ([v]erit er nú, meðan vært er). Þóroddr skattkaupandi advises them all to escape from the farm, “since I expect there will not be peace for us here” ([f]átt hygg ek hér friða, enda flýjum nú allir).⁸⁰

The will of the restless dead has reflected the events of the past and by doing so they have disturbed the harmony of society and its individuals by contaminating some of them with fear, illnesses or madness, or even by causing death. Their requirement for compensation is nonetheless refused, as this has no justification when settled by the rules of the society, the law, the support of the maternal kinsmen of Kjartan and Christian rituals. The presence of their will to harm the living has been permitted at the farm, but now, after the intervention of the above-mentioned forces, they no longer have any peace. The living are released from infection by the dead, the evil deeds of the past. In the process of this, Kjartan becomes a valued and respected member of society, “the bravest of men” (*inn mesti garpr*).⁸¹

It has to be noted, however, that there is a fourth ghost, the herdsman (*sauðamaðr*), which utters words when convicted at the door-court, but his role is somewhat ambiguous. Here a (very) hypothetical reason for his existence in the narrative is posited, on the basis that the herdsman acts as an instrument of order while shepherding the sheep. Interestingly, the names of the persons who are mentioned at the door-court or are otherwise important in the Fróðá episode – Þórgunna, Þóroddr, Þorgríma and Þórir – are all reminiscent of the heathen god Þórr, who is the instrument of order in the world of the gods, the shield against the chaos of giants. Therefore, the living dead that make their voices heard in *Eyrbyggja saga* all carry the symbol of order, either in their occupation or in their names.⁸² This is, of course, a problematic hypothesis if sagas are regarded as tales of people who may actually have existed. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the nature of oral tradition and the connections between the sagas and myth, and the principles of medieval allegory, in which signs were detected in ‘historical’ events, as presented, for instance,

⁸⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 151–152.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 152.

⁸² However, Simonetta Battista (2006, electronic document) has also shown that in Old Norse translation literature the Devil often took the image of heathen gods such as Þórr, and *Flóamanna saga* suggests a link between Þórr and the restless dead appearing in a group. See Þorhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991: 278–286.

in *Homiliae in Evangelia* by Saint Gregory, it is not impossible.⁸³ Even though one connection with the heathen god is not shared by the *sauðamaðr* of *Eyrbyggja saga* – he does not herd goats, the animal connected to both Þórr and sexuality, but instead looks after sheep⁸⁴ – it is possible to interpret the dead here as elements of order, their acts intended to sustain it.

When leaving the farm the shepherd pronounces his opinion, his belief that it would have been better if he had gone earlier ([f]ara skal nú, ok hygg ek, at þó væri fyrr sæmra).⁸⁵ As all the restless dead are gone there is no-one left to ask for compensation or punishment. The case is settled and the ‘crime’ is, or should be, forgotten. Or, to be more precise, it should have been forgotten earlier, as the shepherd states, and also, no doubt, because its poisonous nature did no good to those who have been left behind. Allowing disturbing past deeds to remain and influence the present was no blessing, but a source of fear and illness. In the view of the Christian writer, the people at Fróðá probably needed to be purified of their sins, an act that they initially failed to accomplish when they neglected the fast, something that Kjartan G. Ottósson sees as another reason for the wonders.⁸⁶ The dead thus act as agents of order and moral judges, but their claims do not outlast the fire, and the defence and support granted by the law, Christian faith and kinsmen through which the farm and the people in it are purified in the end.

⁸³ Compare Clunies Ross 1998; Gísli Sigurðsson 2004: 27–29; Poole 2004: 4–5; Tulinus 1999: 302–303; Williams 1996: 73–75. On *Homiliae* see Etaix, Morel, and Judic 2005: 120 and Wolf 2001: 256–266.

⁸⁴ Jennbert 2004: 164. The shepherd in *Eyrbyggja saga* does seem to be regarded as a rather strange and unsociable person as well, and therefore perhaps more easily exposed to the influence of the supernatural. Spending more time outside in the dark also makes him vulnerable to this. Compare Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 82; Tulinus 1999: 295. However, there are two shepherds influenced by the dead in *Eyrbyggja saga*: a *smalamaðr* and a *sauðamaðr*. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 93 and 146. The word *smali* also means ‘goat’ (Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1957: 570), thus suggesting that at least the first herdsman harassed by the dead Þórólfr bægifótr could be looking after goats as well. It is of course possible that the purpose of the shepherd figure in previous oral versions of the story was forgotten by the time *Eyrbyggja saga* as we know it was written, or that the meaning of these earlier versions was corrupted before the story was written down. I thank Philip Line for this insight. Compare, however, Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 109, on how the words of the shepherd differ from the more consistent utterances of the other three, suggesting that the shepherd is a later addition.

⁸⁵ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 152.

⁸⁶ Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 105–106. On fasting in the Middle Ages, see Bynum Walker 1987: 33–47.

From the perspective of Kjartan, the hero whose youth seems to be emphasised in the saga,⁸⁷ the *Fróðárundr* is a rite of passage, a journey of a boy into manhood, less so a chance to prove that he is Björn's son, as Kjartan G. Ottósson has suggested.⁸⁸ This would emphasise his status as an illegitimate son – a status of which he is not so proud, as shown later, for instance, when his maternal uncle calls him *Breiðvíkingr* after his father, and thus 'blames' Kjartan for his origins.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, he is indeed the fruit of forbidden love, which has caused him to have an indeterminate social status as the son of a man who is not his father. His origin is part of his 'identity', that is, what he is considered to be in his own eyes and in the eyes of others. Through his heroic act Kjartan gets a chance to renegotiate his previously indeterminate social status.⁹⁰ He manages to gain the approval of his maternal uncle, who did not approve of Kjartan's parents' relationship, as well as Christian purification of his sins, and legal assurance of his status as the soon-to-be master of the house.

Conclusion

It has to be emphasised that the role of the dead suggested here was not the only one given to the deceased expressing restlessness after their deaths in medieval Iceland, and further studies concerning possible parallels in saga literature still have to be made. Another interesting perspective could be obtained, for instance, by analysing similar prolonged hauntings in other sagas.

In this study, it has been suggested that the restless dead in the *Fróðárundr* episode function as indicators of social and moral conflicts, and act as agents of social order. In the context of the *Eyrbyggja saga*, they represented various individually related mental and collectively experienced social conflicts that affected the lives of those living on the Fróðá farm. These problems and clashes had caused a state of social disequilibrium or disorder, of which the building blocks, that is the past deeds of those involved, were highlighted in the process of the hauntings. The unspoken sins of *Eyrbyggja saga* concerned failures to follow certain sexual norms and their results, namely the birth of offspring with indeterminate status who could thus create social havoc. These clashes, involving expressions of unapproved sexuality and problems of paternity, paternal support and inheritance, were matters that without doubt caused

⁸⁷ Compare also Kjartan G. Ottósson 1983: 52–53.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*: 92–93.

⁸⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson 1935: 155.

⁹⁰ See Kanerva (forthcoming). Compare, however, Kjartan G. Ottósson (1983: 106) who does not see Kjartan acting as a hero in every instance, e.g. when the seal-haired tail is detected.

mental and social disequilibrium in thirteenth-century Icelandic culture, by affecting not only the minds of the individuals concerned, but also social dynamics and order.

In the light of *Eyrbyggja saga*, the dead may be seen to offer those individuals who interact with them a chance to renegotiate their social status. For Kjartan in *Eyrbyggja saga* this is a chance to redeem a status as a respectable member of society and as the farmer of Fróðá. As the dead are harassing the people at Fróðá Kjartan manages to gain his maternal uncle's support as well as that of the law, and proves himself to be a respectable man and farmer, despite his problematic 'identity', brought about by the deeds of his parents.

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