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https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2015/6/kanerva_havingnopower.pdf**Having no Power to Return? Suicide and Posthumous Restlessness in Medieval Iceland¹****Kirsi Kanerva**

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Abstract

The article examines cultural conceptions of the possible afterlives of suicides in medieval (ca. 1200–1400) Iceland: whether those who committed suicide were expected to return as restless dead. It is suggested that suicide corpses were not regarded as inherently dangerous in medieval Iceland. According to the law, those who committed suicide would not be buried in the churchyard, but repentance before the actual moment of death could still make burial in the cemetery possible. The second chance allotted to self-killers raises the question of whether the burial method implied danger and contagion, or merely social exclusion. It is argued that suicide per se was not expected to make the corpse restless. People who were considered weak and powerless in life would not return after death, since posthumous restlessness required that the person had a strong will and motivation to come back. Consequently, in the case of suicides, possible posthumous restlessness depended on the person's character in life. People with strong will and special magical skills were anticipated to return, whereas other suicides remained passive and peaceful.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine cultural conceptions of the possible afterlives of suicides in medieval (ca. 1200–1400) Iceland. I will discuss whether or not medieval Icelanders, who had accepted Christianity in 999/1000, expected those who committed suicide to return posthumously – that is, as those considered restless dead: revenants that were not ethereal phantoms, but dead people appearing to the living in their reanimated physical, still recognizable bodies.

In the medieval and early modern European context, suicide has often been seen both as morally reprehensible and as a possible cause of posthumous activity. Committing suicide was considered a bad deed, (see e.g. Murray 1998; 2000; Mäkinen 2014) especially if the act of self-killing was intentional, whereas if a person sacrificed his or her “life for good purposes” (Mäkinen 2014, 135), the act was not necessarily condemned by the Church Fathers or the medieval philosophers that followed them, and might even be celebrated. Although the ideas of medieval ecclesiastical thinkers may not have been fully adopted by lay people, including those in Iceland, views of suicide as a bad death were represented also in medieval *exempla* with didactic intention and in European popular literature. According to this view, committing suicide ruled out any hope of salvation of the soul and ultimately of partaking in the joys of Heaven. Suicide was a sin because life was God-given and should not, therefore, be taken away by the person him/herself. Those who had committed suicide were often considered to have died suddenly and without the proper preparations for the afterlife: absolution of sins and the proper sacraments. For this reason they were denied burial in sacred ground. As a consequence, in Christian Europe their restless souls were sometimes expected to return to haunt the living. (E.g. Butler 2007, 434; Signori 1994, 34–40). This last tradition was not part of official Christian doctrine, and, according to Alexander Murray, presumably the reason that ghosts of suicides rarely appear in medieval European ecclesiastical sources. Still, lay people may well have believed in the return of people who did not die ‘properly’. (Murray 2000, 23–28, 471–474, 476–479).

Medieval Icelandic thirteenth- and fourteenth-century sagas contain a wide variety of revenants. At first glance, however, none of the posthumously restless appear to have committed suicide, nor do any preventive ‘anti-revenant’ measures appear to have been taken against the return of suicides. (See e.g. Engfield 1972; Murray 2000, 51–52). The sagas are not silent of suicides per se. Although there was no specific word for ‘suicide’ in Old Icelandic language, medieval Icelandic sources speak variably of destroying oneself (e.g. *fara sér sjálfir*, *týna sjálfum sér*, *spilla sér sjálfir*), killing oneself (e.g. *bana sér sjálfir*, *drepa sik sjálfir*), laying one’s own hands on oneself (*leggja hendur á sik*), determining one’s own death (*ráða sér sjálfir bana*), and of a sudden death (*bráðr bani*), or explicate the manner of death (e.g. *hengja sik*, i.e. to hang oneself). (CGV, 51, 77, 105, 143, 256, 378, 486, 582 and 647). According to the Icelandic Old Christian Law (*Kristinn réttur formi*) that will be further introduced below in the discussion, a man was likewise considered to have ‘killed himself’ if he deliberately “does himself a bodily injury that causes his death” ([...] *víðr a ser verk þav er honvm verða at bana*. Finsen 1852, 12).

Lack of anti-revenant measures in medieval Iceland for suicides could suggest that their corpses were not considered particularly dangerous to the living or requiring neutralization. According to Alexander Murray, in the Germanic cultural context construing the corpses of ‘self-murderers’ as dangerous to the living and therefore to be neutralized, for instance by beheading or by pinning the body down in the ground with a stake, is a relatively late idea. This perspective becomes apparent first in the sixteenth century. (Murray 2000, 51–52.)

In Iceland, traces of the belief that those who committed suicide would return after death have survived in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legends, suggesting that the idea had been socially established by then at least. According to

the *Sagnagrunnur* database there are, for instance, examples of suicides that result in posthumous restlessness which causes harm to the living, and which may therefore require neutralization. (See e.g. the legends *Miklabæjar-Solveig*, *Heygarðsdraugurinn á Hvítárvöllum*, *Reimleikinn í Möðrudal*, *Sagnagesturinn*, *Sölvi draugur* and *Hallinkjammí*). As the Icelanders had a lively tradition of revenants in the Middle Ages, it is worth discussing why medieval suicides appear to have remained peaceful in their graves – or did they?

Below I will study medieval Icelandic conceptions and beliefs related to suicide corpses and posthumous restlessness and examine whether all suicides were indeed considered to be peaceful in the afterlife. Earlier research on suicide in medieval Iceland is not very extensive. For this reason I will start by examining the attitudes towards suicide corpses; how were the bodies of suicides buried, and were they considered perilous to the living? I will then study the people who commit suicide and discuss whether they have something in common with other people who become restless after death in sagas?

I will use as my sources both Icelandic laws that were put into writing at the beginning of twelfth century and Old Icelandic sagas, which had an oral origin but were written down (and almost certainly adjusted later), the extant texts dating from the period 1200–1400. (See e.g. Clover and Lindow 1985; Sigurðsson 2004; McTurk 2005). The saga sources that I have used contain a wide variety of genres, ranging from stories of ancient ancestors and Norwegian kings (*Íslendingasögur*, *fornaldarsögur*, *konungasögur*) to miracles of Icelandic saints. Since the space for discussion is limited, I have excluded the mythological self-hanging of the pagan god Óðinn: as a reflection of thirteenth and fourteenth-century norms and practices this is a problematical tale that would need to be discussed at some length before using it as evidence.

My point of departure is that both laws and literature may to certain extent reflect and shape (in the case of literature also mimic) the prevailing social reality, but they are also shaped by it. In addition, both laws and sagas can be normative in that they were intended to condition behavior, and they deal with issues that perplexed and occupied people of the era of their writing. (See e.g. Byock 2004; Lawing 2013, 137). However, both laws and sagas can be ascribed an oral origin. While expecting them to mirror the time in which they were written down, it has to be borne in mind that they consist of various cultural layers: ranging from the period of the settlement of Iceland to the High Middle Ages. (Sigurðsson 2004; Riisøy 2010, 19; Brink 2013; Lawing 2013, 137–138).

I will argue that suicide per se was not expected to make the corpse restless. People who were considered weak and powerless in life would not return after death, since posthumous restlessness required that the person had a strong will and motivation to come back. Consequently, in the case of suicides, possible posthumous restlessness depended on the person's character in life. People with strong will and special magical skills were anticipated to return (Kanerva 2013a, and forthcoming a), whereas other suicides remained passive and peaceful.

Burying the Suicide Corpses

Burying the Restless Dead and Suicides in Sagas

Earlier studies of medieval Icelandic saga literature have demonstrated how the corpses of people who were expected to become posthumously restless or considered dangerous to the living were treated in various ways. The dead bodies could be carried out from the house through artificially made passages instead of doorways as if to lead them astray when they tried to return, and buried far away from human settlement. The corpses could also be covered with stones.

In the eventuality that the corpse became reanimated, it could be disinterred and reinterred in a more appropriate place, decapitated, even burned, and the ashes could be taken out to sea or buried in a desolate area to prevent any further harm. (E.g. Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga*, 40 and 69; Skalla-Grímr in *Egils saga*, 175; Þórólfr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 92–95 and 169–170; Styrr in *Heiðarvíga saga*, 235; Glámr in *Grettis saga*, 113 and 122; Klaufi in *Svarfðela saga*, 207; Gardela 2011; Gardela 2013, 100–107; Riisøy 2015, 74–75).

Such measures were required because, although some of the reanimated dead were benevolent to the living (e.g. Gunnarr in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 192–194), they frequently caused various kinds of physical and mental harm: they could, for instance, bring about excessive fear and madness as well as physical illness and death. (E.g. *Eyrbyggja saga*, 93–95, 146–152, 169–176; *Eiríks saga*, 214–216; *Flóamanna saga*, 255–256; *Grettis saga*, 113–123; *Laxdæla saga*, 39–40; Kanerva 2014a). In other words, the corpses of possible ghost candidates were supposed to be kept away from human habitation, since they were considered dangerous, and, in cases of posthumous restlessness, they were ‘re-slain’ and destroyed.

The burial methods and handling of corpses of suicides are rarely described in detail in saga literature. There is one exception to this rule, which I will comment on throughout this study, and which very briefly and laconically mentions the burial. That the interment *is* mentioned may in itself be significant. The saga in question, *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, is one of the collection of sagas of Norwegian kings known as *Heimskringla*, compiled presumably shortly after 1230, quite possibly by Snorri Sturluson (1178/9–1241), but available today only in later copies (Simek & Pálsson 2007, 169–170; Aalto 2010, 37–42). The saga recites fairly sententiously the burial of a berserk called Haki. It describes Haki as an enemy of King Hálfðan, who is portrayed in the saga as a wise and respectable man. He has abducted the daughter of King Sigurðr Hart (*hjörtr*) to be his wife, but later loses her when King Hálfðan’s men steal her back at Yuletide, as King Hálfðan wishes her to be his queen. According to the saga, Haki has not been able to consecrate the marriage, since his wounds from an earlier battle have been slow to heal and he has been bedridden throughout the autumn and even the beginning of winter. The saga explains how Haki tries to pursue Hálfðan’s men as they are carrying away the daughter of King Sigurðr, but then gives up as he arrives at a frozen lake. The saga states: “He then turned the knob of his sword upside down and placed himself on the point of the sword so that the sword went through him. There he met his death, and he is buried there on the shore of the lake.” ([Þ]á snori hann niðr hjöltum á sverðinu, en lagðisk á blóðrefilinn, svá at sverðit stóð í gögnum hann. Fekk hann þar bana, ok er hann þar heygðr á vatsbakkanum. *Hálfðanar saga svarta*, 89).

The dead berserk warrior who has committed suicide is buried by *water*, an issue that I will discuss in greater depth below, but at this point it is worth noting that no special apotropaic rituals or methods appear to be applied on the suicide. This procedure (or lack of one) is in accordance with the notions of Roy Engfield and Alexander Murray mentioned above, but in order to elaborate further medieval Icelandic views of suicide corpses and whether they were considered somehow harmful or dangerous to the living, I will take a closer look at law texts that may add to the picture of the saga literature and perhaps clarify the scene in *Hálfðanar saga svarta* in particular.

Instructions Concerning the Burial of Suicides in Law

The oldest legal sources in Iceland date from the so-called Free state or Commonwealth period, in which legal premises were created by the establishment of *Alþingi*, the general assembly, and the introduction of the initial Icelandic law known as *Úlfjótslög*, modeled after the West Norwegian Christian Law, *Gulapingslög*, introduced in greater detail below. *Úlfjótslög* has not survived, however, and the earliest surviving law collection is known as *Grágás*. (Fix 1993). The principle of this law was *horizontal* instead of *vertical* (Murray 1998, 129) in that the duty of prosecuting a killer belonged

to kinsmen rather than a single ruler such as a king, as Iceland in the Freestate period (before 1262) was a rural society without any centralized administration or sovereign. There were no towns, nor even villages. (Þorláksson 2005, 136–137).

Grágás is not a unified corpus but a collection, and one of its sections is known as the Old Christian law, *Kristinn réttur forni*. This section was presumably originally compiled by the third bishop of Iceland after Conversion, Þorlák Rúnólfsson (1086–1133, bishop of Skálholt since 1118). (Fix 1993). In *Kristinn réttur forni* bodily self-harm is merely mentioned as being intentional and leading to death, and it is stated that those who die in this way should not be buried in the church, *unless* – since self-inflicted bodily harm did not always result in immediate death – they express in some way that they repented of their deed. Other people who should not be buried in church were those who had not been baptized, outlaws, or people banned by the bishop (Finsen 1852, 12). According to the Old Christian law, then, the corpse of a suicide was equivalent to the corpses of unbaptized, banned and criminal people, but there was still the option of repentance that guaranteed inhumation in consecrated soil. No additional rituals are mentioned.

In 1262, Icelanders submitted to the Norwegian king and thus became part of his realm. The principle of law became vertical in that the executive power was transferred to the king and his bailiffs. (Ólason 1998, 34–37; Riisøy 2010, 21). The above mentioned *Grágás* was replaced by new lawbooks commissioned by the Norwegian king, known as *Járnsíða* from 1271 and the new Christian law (*Kristinn réttur nýi*) of Bishop Árni Þorláksson (1237–1298, bishop of Skálholt since 1269) from 1275. (Fix 1993). The new Christian law repeated the earlier view of *Kristinn réttur forni*, as it states that: “those who lay their hands on themselves and in this wise destroy [i.e. kill] themselves” (*þeir sem hendr leggja á sig oc tyna sialfum ser*) along with “malefactors [...] betrayers, murderers, peace-breakers, trucebreakers, convicted thieves, assassins, men who have been placed under a ban, and revealed robbers” (*Udada menn [...] drotins svikarar, morduargar trygrofar. gridningar. biofar dæmdir. flugumenn. bannsettir menn.oc opinberir rans menn*) should not be buried in the churchyard (Storm 1895, 29; see also Riisøy 2010, 22 on *morduargar* and *gridningar*).

Consequently, although Icelanders were now subject to the Norwegian king, *Kristinn réttur nýi* follows to a great extent the earlier laws in *Grágás*. As in the Old Christian Law, instruction concerning the disposal of suicide corpses is conditionally exclusive. If a suicide had received absolution from his or her sins (*lausn*) or in the presence of witnesses had asked for a priest, or in words, facial expressions or by any other means had shown traces of remorse, he or she could still be interred in the churchyard. (Storm 1895, 29). If the suicide corpse was considered dangerous, it was apparently neutralized by absolution.

Burial at the flood-mark

It is noteworthy that although connections to Norway, the origin of many Icelandic settlers, were apparently lively, and the earliest known Icelandic law from the end of the settlement period was modeled after the Old Gulapíng law, Gulapíngslög (Fix 1993; see also Lawing 2013, 141), the view of suicide corpse in *Kristinn réttur forni* or *Kristinn réttur nýi* was not identical to that of the Norwegian provincial laws. The Gulapíng assembly had been established around 950. The law was used in the legal district of Gulapíng in western Norway until 1274. The oldest surviving fragments of Gulapíngslög date from the twelfth century (a more complete manuscript dates from ca. 1250), but the law was transmitted orally until it was put into writing sometime in the eleventh century, thus suggesting that it could contain various temporal layers. (Rindal 1993; Riisøy 2010, 19; Riisøy 2015, 51; Lawing 2013, 138).

In the Older Gulapingslög it is made explicit that those who committed suicide were literally spoiling their ‘souls’ (Keyser & Munch 1846, 13), thus indicating that self-killing was an act of pollution and contamination of the soul. Gulapingslög also gave orders about the inhumation of suicides. Those who committed suicide should receive the same kind of burial as those who were “traitors and murderers, trucebreakers and thieves” (*drottens svica. oc mordvarga. tryggrova. oc þviovva*). To be precise, they should not be buried in consecrated ground (*i iord helga*), but at the “flood-mark where the water and green turf meet” (*i flödar male. Þar sem særr motesc oc grön torva*, Keyser & Munch 1846, 13; Riisøy 2010, 21, 23–24; Riisøy 2015, 53). A similar location for such burials was also given in the older Frostuþing law of Trøndelag (Keyser & Munch 1846, 392). The Frostuþing assembly had likewise been established around 950 (Rindal 1993), suggesting that both Frostuþing and Gulaping laws were of early origin. Although it cannot be attested that the sections concerning the disposal of suicide corpses originated from oral law that was in use during the period when the Gulaping and Frostuþing assemblies were established, both laws suggest that at a fairly early phase suicide was already considered a ‘crime’ and that a special burial place was designated for suicides along with other severe criminals. Repentance is not mentioned as an opportunity to change one’s fate, but first becomes possible at the end of the thirteenth century (Keyser and Munch 1848, 314–315, 350–351; Storm 1885, 166; Nilsson 1989, 274–275; Riisøy 2015, 64; see also Rindal 1993).

Concerning the burial of Haki mentioned above, the expression *grafa í flæðarmáli*, “bury at the flood-mark” used in both Gulaping and Frostuþing laws is interesting. In addition to these laws, in the Norwegian Borgarþing Christian Law, dating from the first half of the twelfth century and regarded as slightly older than the other two by some scholars, it is severely deformed children who are prescribed burial at *forve*, which presumably likewise indicated the flood-mark – that is, above water during the ebb of the tide. It has been suggested that the *flæðarmál/forve* was considered a place proper for the monstrous as well as the pagan and evil, and was often reserved for those who lacked status in society, such as deformed children that could be associated with evil supernatural agencies and were expected to pose a threat to the living. (Nilsson 1989, 276; Riisøy 2010, 23; Riisøy 2015, 71; Lawing 2013, 138–139, 142–144, 146–147; CGV, 163 and 166; Fritzner 1867, 157, 163).

Disposal of suicide corpses close to water also occurs in European sources. As Murray (2000, 48, 50–51) has pointed out, burying suicide corpses on river banks, in marshland and on shores as a practice can be found in medieval French, Italian and German sources. Ole Fenger (1985, 61) has argued that the custom mentioned in the Norwegian laws was very old and known also in Iceland. The practice of burying at the flood-mark may indeed have been old, but the possible application of this custom in Iceland appears somewhat doubtful in the light of Icelandic sources and has relevance concerning attitudes towards suicide corpses. Although this practice in Norwegian law was associated with the inhumation of criminals and evildoers, in the thirteenth-century *Landnámabók* (Sturlubók version) that describes the settlement period of Iceland around 870–930 and lists the families who inhabited Iceland, this manner of burial is ascribed to a very respectable Icelandic woman known as Unnr/Auðr (the name varies in different sources), whose positive attitude towards Christianity is emphasized in other sources. The versions of her death and burial vary in different sources, but it has been suggested that in the context of her story in general, the flood-mark was construed as purer than the rest of the Icelandic soil because it had been purified by the water from the River Jordan, in which Jesus had been baptized. (Bøe 1963, 398; Vanherpen 2013; see also Fenger 1985, 61; Ohlander 1986, 34). As *Landnámabók* states: “she [i.e. Unnr] was buried at the high water mark as she’d ordered, because having been baptized, she didn’t wish to lie in unconsecrated earth.” ([H]on var grafin í flæðarmáli, sem hon hafði fyrir sagt, því at hon vildi eigi liggja í óvígðri moldu, er hon var skírð. *Landnámabók* (Sturlubók version), 146–147. Trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 55).

The belief in water as a purifying element had deep roots in the indigenous tradition in general. Consequently, drowning was often employed in law when sentencing people who were expected to do harm to others, such as sorcerers

and witches. (Riisøy 2010, 24). In the medieval Norwegian laws mentioned above, the water may thus have been considered a purifying element in cases of inhumation as well, suggesting that corpses of suicides as they were buried *í flæðarmáli* were expected to be harmful to the living. The element of protection to the living is further implied also in the new Christian law of Borgarþing of 1267–1268, which explicated further that the shore is chosen so that the corpses would cause no one harm or damage (Storm 1885, 166; Riisøy 2010, 24; Riisøy 2015, 72).²

In the light of *Landnámabók* it appears, however, that in the Icelandic context the purified soil at the flood-mark was allotted to a respectable person, who, from the perspective of the thirteenth-century Christian writer was a kind of ‘noble heathen’: one who, in the context of the sagas, related positively towards Christianity in the age of heathendom (i.e. prior to year 1000) and was portrayed in a positive light (Vanherpen 2013; on the concept noble heathen, see Lönnroth 1969). In this light, the practice of burying suicides at the flood-mark – if it was ever used in medieval Iceland – may have had somewhat ambiguous implications, especially as some of the dead in sagas who were expected to return *were* interred in places ‘where the water and green turf meet’.

For instance, *Egils saga* tells of Skalla-Grímr who, after he has died in great anger, is prepared for burial in the manner that resembles the rituals employed for another notorious restless corpse, Þórólfr in *Eyrbyggja saga* (92). Special precaution is taken so that the gaze of the dead cannot do anyone harm, and a hole is made in the wall to carry the corpse out of the house. (*Egils saga*, 174–175; Jakobsson 2011, 296; Kanerva 2013a, 213–214). The saga then recites how the corpse is transported at high tide (*at flóði*) on a ship to a peninsula known as Digraness, where a mound (*haugr*) is built for it on the tip of the ness. (*Egils saga*, 175). Consequently, Skalla-Grímr the ghost-candidate is buried on a piece of land where the sea level appears to change periodically, similar to Unnr/Auðr the good Christian above. It is possible that flood-mark, marsh and shores were of a special nature in medieval Icelandic thought, in that in these areas both the living and the dead were protected and kept uncontaminated and separated, or that the location was regarded as somehow neutral.³ (See also Nilsson 1989, 276; Riisøy 2010, 23).

It should be noted, however, that Skalla-Grímr is by no means represented as a criminal or an evildoer in the saga, but as a respectable ancestor of some remarkable thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders, including the saga’s possible writer Snorri Sturluson (see e.g. Hallberg 1962; West 1980; Tulinius 2002, 234–237). Skalla-Grímr is occasionally somewhat ill-natured, but cannot be equated with the criminals listed in the Norwegian laws. He also differs from the twelve berserks in Norway in the early fourteenth-century *Grettis saga*, which portrays them as evil-doers who are buried *í flæðarurð*, namely in “rocks reached by high water” (*Grettis saga*, 70; CGV, 163). At the moment it should be pointed out that, correspondingly to Haki the berserk mentioned above, who is not interred at the flood-mark per se, Skalla-Grímr is also buried on the edge of the water. Consequently, the evidence discussed above allows the interpretation that Haki was buried on the lake shore because danger to the living was associated with the corpse, and the closeness of water (or stones that could be heaped on top of the corpse) was expected to protect people. (See also Riisøy 2015, 72; *Flóamanna saga*, 285). However, we cannot yet unequivocally attest that Haki was considered dangerous *because he had committed suicide*.

² Bertil Nilsson 1989, 276, has suggested that the flood-mark as burial place was chosen in order to avoid the use of heathen burial methods that were prohibited e.g. in Gulapingslög (Larson 1935, 51–52; Keyser & Munch 1846, 14), such as burying the corpse in a mound (*haugr*) or by heaping stones over the corpse (*hreysar*).

³ See also on water, e.g. rivers as *barriers* between the dead and the living in Caciola 1996, 30.

Potential Restless Corpses or Excluded Members of the Society?

Since both the Old and New Christian Laws denied suicides burial in the churchyard if they had not repented, where were such corpses interred, and what attitudes does the practice indicate? Both the Old and New Christian laws give fairly similar instructions concerning the disposal of suicide corpses. *Kristinn réttir nýi* states:

These men [i.e. malefactors as listed in the excerpts above, including suicides] shall be buried outside the [church]yard [or: fence, farm]⁴ and not closer to farmsteads than within bowshot distance where there is no cattle, arable land nor pasture, and water should not fall from there to farmsteads. (*Enn þessa menn skal grafa utan [kyrkiu]gardz eigi nærr en í örscotz helgi vid tungarþ þar er hvarki fe akr né eng. oc eigi falli þáþan votn til bolstada*. Storm 1895, 29; see also *Kristinn réttir forna* in Finsen 1852, 12).

The practical advice concerning the location where the corpses of suicides should be interred – not in places where food and drink for both humans and animals was produced, which would have been constantly visited by the living – suggests that the bodies were thought to contain something that was thought harmful to living creatures. (See also Riisøy 2010, 24; Riisøy 2015, 63). As *Hálfðanar saga svarta* (89) tells us that Haki the berserk chased Hálfðan's men “for a while” (*um hríð*) until he arrived at the frozen lake, on whose shore he was buried in a mound, his burial place may likewise have been situated far away from human settlements. Accordingly, like the suicide corpses in law, Haki's corpse needed to be kept away from places where there was ‘cattle, arable land or pasture’.

Such spatial exclusion is also reminiscent of the disposal of restless corpses. *Laxdæla saga* (40) and *Grettis saga* (122) explain that the restless corpse of Hrappr and the ashes of Glámr the revenant's burnt body were both buried “somewhere far away from sheep and men alike” (*þar er sízt væri fjárgangr í nánd eða mannaferðir*. *Laxdæla saga*, 40; trans. Keneva Kunz in Hreinsson 1997 (V), 19; see also Lawing 2013, 142–143, on the disposal of the bodies of deformed children). *Laxdæla saga* states, “Hrapp[r]'s haunting decreased considerably after this” (*Eptir þetta nemask af heldr aptgöngur Hrapps*. *Laxdæla saga*, 40; trans. Keneva Kunz in Hreinsson 1997 (V), 19), suggesting that the dangerousness of Hrappr's corpse (or Glámr's ashes) diminished because of the distance, but did not wholly disappear. They were not neutralized, but their impact on humans was restricted by relocation to a place so remote that humans and animals alike rarely went near it. In this light, the interment ordained by the law for suicides and the case of Haki's burial suggest that, despite the absence of restless *suicide* corpses in sagas, they were nevertheless regarded as dangerous to the living.

What complicates this suggestion is, however, the notion presented above that in both Old and New Christian Laws the bishops could still permit burial in consecrated ground if the suicide expressed remorse, either verbally or non-verbally. Obviously the corpse of such suicides would have been purified in the context of Christianity, but the second chance allotted to self-killers raises the question of whether the burial method implied contagion, or merely social exclusion.⁵

⁴ See also footnote 5 below on the location of cemeteries before and after Conversion.

⁵ It should be noted here that according to archeological evidence, before and briefly after Conversion just about every farm had its own cemetery that was often situated at a distance away from the settlement so that the graves were not within sight, e.g. on the boundaries of farms or outside home fields. After Conversion, a change gradually took place, the number of cemeteries diminished and they were located adjacent to church and chapels. The location of the cemetery was usually close to farm houses, inside the boundaries of the home field. Consequently, it has been suggested that whereas the dead in general were ‘marginalized’ and ‘excluded’ in the Pre-Christian period and shortly after that, from the eleventh century onwards they were gradually ‘included’ and ‘appropriated’ in the community of the living, as is reflected in the Old and New Christian Laws. (Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 2011).

To return to *Kristinn réttir fömi*, besides suicides those groups that are not permitted to be buried in church are the unbaptized and the corpses of the ‘wood-men’ (that is, ‘men who lived in the woods’, outlaws), along with “those who are not fit to be fed or harboured and not to be ferried”, again indicating outlaws (*Þess er ö æll er. oc öferiandi*. Finsen 1852, 12). Consequently, in addition to suicides those who were denied a burial in the church or churchyard are convicted criminals and outlaws who were legally excluded from society while they were alive. They had been a threat to society and therefore they belonged to the ‘wild’, a place beyond control, and not on the ‘inside’, that is within society where peace prevailed. The *örskotshelgr* mentioned above in both the Old and New Christian Laws indicated the distance from a farmstead where an outlaw was sacrosanct (i.e. within bowshot distance), that is, *heilagr*, and therefore could not be slain with impunity (Hastrup 1985, 136–145; CGV, 248 and 768; on outlawry see Ahola 2014, 78–104). According to the Old Christian Law, when outlaws died they were expected to be kept isolated from the rest of society, *unless* they were permitted to be buried in the church or churchyard by the bishop (Finsen 1852, 12). The complete deprivation of church burial for murderers, convicted thieves [*þiofa dæmda*] and unbaptized people appears first in the New Christian Law. (Storm 1895, 29).

Isolation in burial could have been considered a post-mortem punishment, excluding the above-named groups from society in the afterlife, just as they had been excluded in life (see also Miettinen 2012 and forthcoming on regulation of burial places as part of the legal punishment in early modern Sweden). It should also be noted that the other groups excluded from church burial – outlaws, malefactors and convicted criminals – may not have been regarded as capable of returning posthumously. Some famous outlaws who did not become revenants were indeed buried (*dysjaðr*) in a strongly built cairn, by heaping stones over the corpse (*Gísla saga*, 115; *Grettis saga*, 263), a burial method that was usually used for witches, criminals *and* people who became posthumously restless, and thus considered an improper interment (*dysja*, *kasa* and *götva* in CGV, 111, 226 and 332; Riisøy 2015, 73; *Landnámabók*, 135; the burials of Hrappr, Stígandi (*Laxdæla saga*, 69, 109), Þórólfr (*Eyrbyggja saga*, 92, 169), Styrr (*Heiðarvíga saga*, 235) and Glámr (*Grettis saga*, 113); Kanerva 2013a, 215). In sagas, this burial method (*dysja*, *kasa* or *götva*: in *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog*) appears not to have been used in cases of suicide, however. Both Old and New Christian Laws use the word *grafa*, and Haki the berserk is *heygðr*, buried in a mound (*Hálfðanar saga svarta*, 89), and not *dysjaðr*. In the light of what has been discussed above, suicides may have been construed as against the law and thus socially bad – bearing in mind that ‘law’ was held more or less as a synonym for ‘society’ since, according to Kirsten Hastrup (1985, 136) “the only precise term for the Icelandic society” was *vár lög*, literally ‘our law’. Being a criminal suicide would therefore have been considered outside the society as well, but this exclusion would not necessarily have made him or her a possible ghost candidate. Consequently, it is possible that suicide corpses were not unconditionally dangerous or even contagious, but burial outside the churchyard denoted a state of exclusion that could change into inclusion.

Haki the berserk mentioned above is not called an outlaw in the saga, but since he is represented as the enemy of the protagonist of the saga, King Hálfðan, he may have been thought deserving of post-mortem exclusion by the saga writer. Haki is nevertheless buried close to water and presumably far away from the abodes of men, which links him to saga ghosts and ghost candidates. Although the burial of Haki may imply that he was expected to be – and perhaps became – posthumously restless, at this stage it cannot be argued that all suicides were potential revenants. Accordingly, I will discuss next whether suicides – including Haki the berserk – had something in common with people whose corpses became reanimated other than just the method of burial.

The Suicides in Sagas

Saga Revenants: Who Were They and Why Did They Return?

As demonstrated in earlier studies, the dead in sagas returned because they had had issues and conflicts in life that were unresolved at the time of death. The dead were expected to be conscious of what was going on in the vicinity of their mounds, and consequently they could also come back to restore equilibrium if the living had caused social disequilibrium. Dying in great anger was also expected to result in posthumous restlessness. (e.g. Ellis 1977; Ellis Davidson 1981; Ottósson 1983; Lindow 1986; Glauser 1993; DuBois 1999, 69–91; Tulinius 1999; Ólason 2003; Martin 2005; Kanerva 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Kanerva forthcoming a).

The dead usually became restless of their own free and often malevolent will. In effect, most of the revenants were strong-willed people in life and continued to exert their authority and participate posthumously in the society of the living as physical entities, as if some kind of life power and vitality had remained in their corpses. (Ólason 2003, 161 and 167; Nedkvitne 2004, 38–43; Byock 1982, 133; Martin 2005, 75–80; Kanerva 2013a, 2015, 105, and forthcoming a).

Some of the revenants were people who had been skilled in magic or possessed other supernatural skills. Many of them had an unusual or extraordinary appearance, such as remarkable size or wolf-grey hair, and a nasty and wicked character. In life they could be greedy, selfish and malevolent, and discontented with their own lot, which motivated them to create discord among others. Their character became often even worse as they aged and, naturally, their ill will towards the living after they had died would not diminish. (Ottósson 1983, 49–50; Nedkvitne 2004, 38; Jakobsson 2005, 298–301). Did suicides share characteristics with these revenants? To scrutinize this, I will briefly look at the reasons for suicides as they are described in sagas.

The Weak and Powerless Self-Killers

The thirteenth-century *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that excessive fear and panic could cause someone to act irrationally: if this action resulted in his or her death, he or she was considered to have killed himself. Such irrationality is associated in the saga with slaves and farmworkers, that is, with lower social categories. The saga tells of male slaves who are driving sheep. They are frightened when they see men riding towards them and erroneously assume that they are enemies chasing them, as a man called Nagli has suggested to them. Shortly before Nagli has been unnerved by a battle and he now runs wildly to escape the riders, who are in fact his friends, not his erstwhile opponents. According to the saga, at this point Nagli “lost his nerve and ran away up onto the mountain [where he meets the slaves], scared out of his wits” (*glúpnæði [...] ok hljóp umfram ok í fjallit upp ok varð at gjalti. Eyrbyggja saga, 37; Trans. Judy Quinn in Hreinsson 1997 (V), 146*). We may assume that the slaves acted in the same way, as their behavior is similar to Nagli’s.

Both Nagli and the slaves rush in panic and terror towards a nearby cliff and “the slaves ran ahead and jumped off the promontory and were killed, which was to be expected because the cliff is so high that everything perishes that goes over it.” ([P]rælarnir hljópu þar fyrir ofan ok fram af höfðanum ok týndusk, sem ván var, því at höfðinn er svá hár, at allt hefir bana, þat er þar ferr ofan. *Eyrbyggja saga, 38. Trans. Judy Quinn in Hreinsson 1997 (V), 147*). Only Nagli escapes this fate, as his companions who have participated in the battle (those mistaken by him as the enemy) reach him before it is too late.

The death of the slaves in *Eyrbyggja saga* is inevitable. The early fourteenth-century *Göngu Hrólfis saga*, one of the so-called Legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) that recite stories of the mythical past, calls such a deliberate death caused by irrational

actions caused by extreme emotional reaction, ‘self-killing’. The saga includes a tale of a group of pagan wizards (*seiðmenn*) who commit suicide by jumping from a cliff or into a lake. As the wizards’ witchcraft is countered by the spells of one of Göngu-Hrólfir’s (the saga protagonist’s) men they “became so frightened that they ran out of their house each in their separate direction, bellowing” and “all of them killed themselves” (*en seiðmönnunum brá svá við, at þeir [...] hlupu beļjandi út af húsínu á sinn veg hvern þeira.[...] ok drápu sik allir. Göngu Hrólfis saga, 319*). As in the case of the wizards, the slaves in *Eyrbyggja saga* have become incapable of acting in a rational manner, as they are ‘out of their wits’ or ‘turned mad with terror’, that is: *at gjalti*, a metaphoric phrase that literally meant that one was “turned into a hog [= *göltr*]” (CGV, 223), a reference to animals, which were prone to wild panic that could indicate that terror of this kind could strongly affect the behavior of men. In mainstream medieval Christian thought, especially from Augustine of Hippo onwards, animals were considered irrational, that is, devoid of the reason that humans possessed. (De Leemans and Klemm 2007, 153–157; Line forthcoming). This is something that cannot be explored further here, but there may be an implied comparison between the behavior of these farm laborers and animals in this episode.

Fear of (severe) punishment as a motive for suicide among criminals and the medieval European idea that extreme emotions tended to lead to self-harm have already been pointed out in earlier studies (McNamara & Ruys 2014, 64–66, 73). However, it is worth noting that in the context of *Eyrbyggja saga* these motives and causes of suicide may not have been applied to all social strata. The witless men in *Eyrbyggja saga* are either nameless or lacking genealogy (like Nagli): both are always given to significant people in sagas. From the perspective of the elite responsible for saga production, such nameless people without genealogies were negligible, usually inferior in social status. As I have argued elsewhere, such people were represented in sagas as more prone to fear than remarkable men and some exceptional women. Fear indicated weakness in that it could make people vulnerable to external influences, such as illnesses and supernatural forces, and the behavior of the fearful was often represented as jumpy and volatile – that is, inclined to be ‘scared out of their wits’. (Kanerva 2014a).

Carol Clover (1993) has pointed out that in Old Icelandic society people were not categorized strictly by the binary opposition male-female, but between *hvatr*, which meant ‘powerful, vigorous and bold’ and *blauðr*, ‘soft, weak and powerless’, or, respectively, the mighty who put the bread on the table (*magi*) and those who were dependent on them (*úmagi*). The category of *blauðr/úmagi* thus included “most women, children, slaves, and old, disabled, or otherwise disenfranchised men” (380) who were thus considered soft, weak and powerless compared to men (especially aristocratic men and some exceptional women) who were regarded as *hvatr/magi*. (Clover 1993, 380 and passim.). Accordingly, the slaves in *Eyrbyggja saga* would have been categorized as *blauðr*, as weak and powerless.

As might be expected, such weak and powerless people as slaves did not share characteristics with saga revenants. Consequently, they would not become posthumously restless in sagas, *unless* their corpses were reanimated by some external power, such as an unclean spirit (e.g. Glámr in *Grettis saga*, 122; Ólason 2003, 165; see also Kanerva 2015, 141–142, and forthcoming b), or there existed a dead person who shared characteristics with other saga revenants and served as a kind of life power source which could reanimate groups of dead consisting of nameless or otherwise socially inferior people (e.g. Garðarr in *Eiríks saga*, 214–217; Þórólfr and Þórgunna in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 94, 146–150; see also Ólason 2003, 164; Kanerva 2011).

Posthumous inactivity of the slaves in the case of suicide in particular is indicated, for instance, in the above mentioned *Landnámabók*. According to this text, a man called Ásmundr dies and “was buried there and laid in a ship, and a slave who had not wanted to live after him and killed himself was laid there with him”, in the stern of the ship (*Ásmundr var heygðr þar ok í skip lagðr ok þrell hans með honum, sá er sér banaði sjálfir ok vildi eigi lifa eftir Ásmund*. Hauksbók version in

Landnámabók, 105). Later we read that Ásmundr appears to his wife in a dream and tells her that the slave is of no use to him (Hauksbók version in *Landnámabók*, 105). The Sturlubók version of *Landnámabók* does not indicate the slave's manner of death – whether he killed himself or was, for instance, ritually killed to follow his master (*Landnámabók*, 102, 104) – but in both Sturlubók and Hauksbók the posthumous inactivity of the slave is implied. In both versions folk who walk by the mound can hear the mound-dweller recite a verse that describes the sluggishness of the slave and his uselessness to his master (*Landnámabók*, 102, 104 (Sturlubók version) and 105 (Hauksbók version)).

On board my ship
 in this stony mound,
 no crew here
 crowding around me;
 Far better solitude
 than feeble support.
 A fine sailor I was once;
 That won't be forgotten. (Trans. Pálsson and Edwards 1972, 39)

*(Einn byggvik stöð steina,
 stafnrúm Atals hrafn,
 esat of þegn á þiljum
 þröng, býk á mar ranga.
 Rúm es böðvitrum betra,
 brimdýri knák stýra,
 lífa mun þat með lofðum
 lengr, en illt of gengi.)*

Landnámabók then states that after this incident the slave's corpse was removed from the ship. The verse spoken and the appearance of Ásmundr in his wife's dream suggest that it is only Ásmundr himself who is active and capable of communicating with the living, whereas the slave appears useless to him and affords him no assistance. The verse implies that the slave is not showing any activity and is devoid of energy, as his support is 'feeble'. As a slave when alive he may have been categorized as *blauðr*, weak and powerless, and it seems that he continued to be so after death. If weak when still alive, a person was presumably not expected to change after death, just as people were not expected the change in character during life. This is suggested by the proverb in the Eddic poem *Fáfnismál*: "few are brave (i.e. *hvatr*) when they become old, if they are cowardly (i.e. *blauðr*) in childhood" (*fá er hvatr, er hroðaz tegr, ef í barnæsko er blauðr. Fáfnismál* 6 in *Edda*, 181. Trans. Larrington 1996, 158).

The explanation why some suicides in sagas do not appear to result in posthumous restlessness may well be the low social status of the suicides, or that they were regarded as *blauðir*. Strong will and authority that the revenants had possessed in life and continued to exert in death was something that the fearful slaves and farm-workers lacked.

Grief and Sorrow of the Old as a Reason for Suicide

As the case of Ásmundr's slave in *Landnámabók* suggests, great sorrow was thought to incite people to commit suicide in medieval Iceland. Such an emotional condition was also associated with moments when someone lost his or her will to live. The mid-thirteenth-century *Vatnsdæla saga* (Simek & Pálsson 2007, 412), for instance, tells of Eyvindr and Gauti, who after hearing that their old friend Ingimundr has died of a spear wound inflicted by a felon, decided to end their lives by throwing themselves on their own swords. As Gauti expresses it: "[I]f life is not worth living for the friends of Ingimundr" (*Erat vinum líft Ingimundar. Vatnsdæla saga*, 63–64. Trans. Andrew Wawn in Hreinsson 1997 (IV), 31).

In the saga context, Eyvindr's and Gauti's suicides are comprehensible in the light of the medieval Icelandic blood feud tradition: as Ingimundr's friends who had arrived together with him from Norway to Iceland, both Eyvindr and Gauti were presumably already elderly men and therefore not necessarily capable of avenging Ingimundr's death together with Ingimundr's sons, as was expected of them. In the saga context, leaving a death unavenged was interpreted as a great shame. Such behavior was considered unmanly and implied passivity, and was not part of the ideal code of conduct. A man who behaved in such a dishonorable way was a *níðingr*, a coward and not to be trusted, since he failed to follow the code of conduct. (Riisøy 2010, 20–23).

Both Eyvindr and Gauti appear to escape the allegations of shame by committing suicide. This is implied also by *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which relates how the old and wise Njáll refuses to leave his house when the enemies of his sons are about to burn it with his sons inside. He dies deliberately (albeit not by his own hand), and says: "I will not leave, for I'm an old man and hardly fit to avenge my sons, and I do not want to live in shame." (*Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm. Brennu-Njáls saga*, 330. Trans. Robert Cook in Hreinsson 1997 (III), 156. See also Engfield 1972, 7–8; Jakobsson 2005, 305–306).

Eyvindr, Gauti and Njáll are all old men and presumably lacking in physical strength, no longer as able-bodied as they once were. In the European context such infirmity caused by old age was considered a common reason for suicide, as suggested by McNamara and Ruys (2014, 62–63) in their study of medieval English sources. Eyvindr and Gauti, like Njáll, appear unwilling to live on, although Njáll, as the saga's wise man, (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 57) would presumably have had the means to seek legal retribution. Living made no sense anymore since being alive would entail living in shame and grief. Death was preferable.

It is questionable whether medieval Icelanders associated such a condition – that there was nothing to hope or wish for (see *örvilna* and *örvæna* in CGV, 768) – with despair. In medieval mainland Europe and England despair was regarded as a mental state that often exposed people to suicide (McNamara & Ruys 2014, 66–67, 69–74). A story in the miracle collection of the Icelandic Saint Þorlákr (1133–1193), officially canonized in 1984 but informally sanctified in Iceland soon after his death, tells how a man called Steinþórr crosses a river on a ferry, but it suddenly sinks and all the people on board end up in the water. Steinþórr becomes "very exhausted from the cold" (*þrekaðr mjök af kulða*); he sees people around him, most of whom are lifeless, and at this point the saga states that "then he did not expect to outlive them either" ([v]ætti hann þá ok ekki sér lífs). He is dressed in leather breeches (*skinnbrækr*) that are soaked and make him as heavy as a stone, so that he sinks to the bottom of the river and "then his breath failed him" ([þ]á var þrotit örendi hans). Before this, Steinþórr has anticipated that his life will come to end and has ceased to fight for his life: he only pleads to God and Saint Þorlákr that his corpse will be found. Steinþórr has accepted his fate, but as the nature of the source suggests, his life does not end as a deliberate death, as he is miraculously saved by Saint Þorlákr. (*Jarteinabók Þorláks biskups in forna*, 138–139).

The relevance of the Steinþórr episode to this study is his psycho-physical condition: he is both physically exhausted and lacking any hope whatsoever of surviving. It could be suggested that he had sunk into despair and lost the will to live, which would make his death ‘deliberate’. Additionally, we should remember his physical exhaustion, as awareness of his lack of bodily strength obviously plays a part in his behavior, just as it does in the deliberate deaths of Njáll and Ingimundr’s friends, whose strength has diminished with age. In all the above-mentioned instances it is clearly indicated that the saga characters in question have lost their will to live, which allows us to speculate that they did not have the will or the strength to return either. They were perhaps not entirely helpless (*úmagi*), but they lacked the physical strength (*megn*) to avenge their kinsmen. As old men they could be considered *blauðir*, and lacking in *megin* – *megin* referred not only to physical strength that could deteriorate with both age and illness, but also might. They may also have lost some of their power to influence, in that they could be marginalized and less heed was paid on their words than before. (CGV, 420–421 and 668–669; See also Clover 1993, 364; Tolley 2009 (I), 158–160, 381, 473–474 on *megin*; Jakobsson 2005, 303–310).

The suicides (or: deliberate deaths) that did not result in posthumous restlessness discussed above are thus represented as either socially inferior or old and lacking strength, might and zeal for living and, as a result, weak and powerless. They were not expected to possess the strength of will to return that was required of a revenant, nor are they portrayed as selfish, greedy or malicious in nature, which are common characteristics of the Icelandic ghosts (Jakobsson 2005).

Returning to Haki the berserk, *Hálfðanar saga svarta* (88) does allow the interpretation that Haki is in a state of infirmity when he commits suicide, since the saga says: “his wounds healed badly” and he “lay wounded in the autumn and the beginning of winter” (*sár hans höfðusk illa. [...] lá í sárum um haustit ok öndurðan vetr*). Hálfðan’s men have burned down his hall, taken all his wealth, as well as Ragnhildr whom he had intended as his wife (89), suggesting that Haki has lost everything, his possessions as well as his health, although it is unclear whether he was perceived as being in despair.

It should be noted, however, that although infirmity and powerlessness caused by old age or physical exhaustion could make someone lose his or her will to live, age and physical illness as such were not reasons for posthumous inactivity. Although old men are occasionally represented as resorting to behavior that is more often ascribed to women (e.g. goading others to violence) and they may have been considered *blauðir* and thus weak and powerless (Clover 1993; Jakobsson 2005, 312), some old and supposedly infirm people appear fairly active in the afterlife. For instance, *Laxdæla saga* describes Hrappr as bedridden because of the ‘illness’ (i.e. *sótt*) of ageing, but despite this apparent physical infirmity he becomes a restless corpse after his death and is fairly vicious to those who remain (39). Þóroflr in *Eyrbyggja saga* (93–95, 169–176) is likewise an old man when he dies, but still ferocious to the living.

Ármann Jakobsson (2005) has shown that the theme ‘angry old man’ is fairly common in sagas. Although such old men are perhaps bitter that they have lost the authority and fame that they used to have while still able-bodied, they have a vicious character that becomes even worse with age and act accordingly. Clearly difficult people who had unfinished business could return after death even though they had died while infirm, like the above-mentioned Hrappr in *Laxdæla saga*. Referring again to the proverb in *Fáfnismál*: it seems that if once *hvatr*, one could remain *hvatr* in old age, even if crippled by infirmity, as one did not lose power but could continue to exert one’s will without others being able to resist, which happens in Hrappr’s case. According to the saga, his wife “dared not go against his wishes” (*treystisk eigi öðru*), as Hrappr had ordered before his death: “When I’m dead I want to be buried in the kitchen doorway. Have me placed in the ground upright, so I’ll be able to keep a watchful eye over my home” ([E]n þá at ek em andaðr, þá vil ek mér láta gröf grafa í eldhúsdurum, ok skal mik niðr setja standanda þar í durunum; má ek þá enn vendiligar sjá yfir hýbýli mín. *Laxdæla saga*, 39. Trans. Keneva Kunz in Hreinsson 1997 (V), 19).

Haki the berserk clearly commits suicide and appears to share characteristics with Eyvindr and Gauti or Njáll in that he is not as able-bodied as he used to be. He is in a state of infirmity, but like Hrappr, he has something in common with saga revenants as well. As noted, Haki is called a berserk in the saga, and as I will discuss next, his 'berserkness' may have influenced the manner of his burial.

Death and Afterlife of a (Suicidal) Berserk and Shapeshifter

The nature of berserks, and even whether they actually existed in the Viking Era, is very controversial, but some sources hint that they may have had a particular relationship with the pagan god Óðinn. However, here I am concerned with their portrayal in the sagas, in which they are violent, abductors of women, and sometimes associated with magic. (E.g. *Ynglinga saga*, 17; Blaney 1993, 37–38; Schjødt 2011; Samson 2011; Line 2014, 199–205).

In the saga context, some respectable people were capable of berserk rage (even though they were not necessarily called *berserks*). Such people were often associated with magical skills. *Egils saga* states of Kveld-Úlfr (literally Evening-Wolf) that he was *hamramr*, that is: able to change his shape, *hamr* (i.e. *skipta hömum/hamask*), and capable of berserk rage. Kveld-Úlfr's son, the above-mentioned Skalla-Grímr, resembles him in character and behavior. Later the saga also tells us that Skalla-Grímr was himself capable of becoming a berserk, that is he could *hamask*. (*Egils saga*, 4, 69–70, 101–102; CGV, 236–237; Strömbäck 2000, 160–173; Kanerva 2014b, 221–226. On berserks and shapeshifting, see also e.g. Guðmundsdóttir 2007; Blaney 1993, 37–38; Schjødt 2011; Line 2014, 199–205; Higley 2005, 365–367; Samson 2011, 226–259).

In addition to Skalla-Grímr, whose corpse is buried at the flood-mark, some other saga characters appear to have been capable of becoming berserks and could become posthumously active. Their corpses were often treated accordingly, as they are decapitated, buried in faraway places and in rocks by the sea. (See e.g. Klaufi in *Svarfdæla saga*, 207; two berserks in *Eyrbyggja saga*, 74–75; 12 berserks in *Grettis saga*, 70). *Svarfdæla saga*, whose earliest version probably existed in the 1250s (Boyer 1993; Simek & Pálsson 2007, 371) tells of Klaufi, a man of respectable origin who is nevertheless sometimes hard to deal with and who occasionally experiences moments of mad frenzy (e.g. *Svarfdæla saga*, 161, 171). On the night when Klaufi is killed, he first experiences similar kind of berserk fit that ends as his deceitful wife becomes affectionate towards him. Like others who calm down after they have experienced berserk rage, Klaufi too becomes utterly weak as the frenzy leaves him. At this moment of weakness Klaufi cannot even carry the heavy burden that has been on his back, and his sword slips out of its sheath. His wife casts the weapon further away – to her brothers, who immediately use it to kill Klaufi. After the incident, however, as the wife goes to bed, the dead Klaufi returns and tries to share the same bed with his wife. The wife's brothers decapitate Klaufi's corpse, and the head is positioned between Klaufi's feet, an act that usually prevents further posthumous restlessness. Klaufi does not try to get close to his wife any longer. However, despite the beheading, Klaufi is not prevented from walking later on, carrying his head under his arm – harassment that continues for several years after Klaufi's death. (*Svarfdæla saga*, 172–181, 189–190, 207).

Klaufi has apparently been in the mood for love immediately before his death, directly after the berserk fit has left his body. This 'mood' seems to persist after Klaufi dies, and causes him to search for his wife. Consequently, Klaufi has a motive for his return. Still, not even the decapitation that followed his restlessness prevents Klaufi from walking again. During the second period of Klaufi's restlessness, which lasts for years, his restlessness appears to be motivated by his urge to revenge, and is probably made possible by his wrath, which may be related to the berserk rage that he so often experienced while he still lived as well as to the manner of his death. As I have argued elsewhere, in some of the sagas

posthumous restlessness is linked to the existence of anger in the dead person's breast. In medieval Icelandic thought, anger was construed as a kind of dynamistic force or energy that, if a person died angry (e.g. *Eyrbyggja saga*, 91–92), was thought to remain in the corpse and function as an impetus that generated its restlessness. (Kanerva 2015, 105; Kanerva forthcoming a).

Shortly after Klaufi is killed, he appears to his kinsmen and assists them in taking revenge on his killers. Afterwards he harasses people, but is finally banished after his kinsman disinters his undecayed body and burns it (*Svarfdæla saga*, 207).

Like Klaufi, Haki the berserk was presumably expected to have some unfinished business, since his farm had been burned and both his wealth and his woman had been taken from him. People may have anticipated that a person like Haki would still harbor anger after death, and possess a desire for retribution that could motivate his return. As he was a berserk, medieval Icelanders would have expected him to possess the strength needed to return.

Hálfðanar saga svarta does not in any instance state that Haki's corpse was reanimated, and such restlessness can only be speculated upon in the light of his burial. There are, however, some exceptions to the rule 'suicides do not become posthumously restless in sagas'. The twelfth-century *Yngvars saga víðförla* serves as an example. *Yngvars saga* is a Legendary saga that describes Viking expeditions to Russia around the year 1000, which was presumably written by an Icelandic Benedictine monk called Oddr Snorrason (end of the 12th century). The original text, which does not survive, was presumably in Latin, but around 1200 the saga was translated into Icelandic, although the earliest surviving manuscripts of this vernacular version date from the fifteenth century. (Simek & Pálsson 2007, 433–434; Wolf 1993). The saga tells of three daughters of a pagan king in the foreign lands, far to the east towards which Yngvarr the Far-Traveller is heading. According to the saga, the oldest daughter "envied the gold and riches of her [younger] sisters" after their father had died. After this, the older daughter committed suicide, or literally, "she spoiled herself" (*Hún spillti sér sjálf*), and later the second sister followed her example. Later still, the third sister also died and was buried in the same place as her father and two older sisters. Yngvarr and his men have seen a great dragon on the same spot. (*Yngvars saga*, 379).

The saga suggests that people have two versions of the death of the family and its connection with the dragon. According to the saga, people said that dragon had eaten the corpses of the king and his daughter, "but some people thought they [i.e. the king and his daughters] had become dragons" (*en sumir men ætla, at þau sé at drekum orðin. Yngvars saga*, 380). The second version suggests that the two daughters who committed suicide became posthumously restless, but instead of returning as living corpses they appeared in the shape of a dragon. This should not surprise us, since the youngest of the princesses at least is portrayed as an exceptional woman who has special skills: she had taken the guardianship of the place after her father – she is "like a son" or a maiden king (see also Clover 1993, 369–370) – and continued to exert her authority after death, since she filled "the hall [of her castle] every night with lots of devils" (*Hún skipar hverja nótt höllina með fjölda djöfla. Yngvars saga*, 379).

Similarly, the fourteenth-century *Þorskfirðinga saga*, whose earliest but no longer surviving version existed already in the thirteenth century (Simek & Pálsson 2007, 137–138) mentions possible posthumous shape-shifting. The saga tells of Gull-Þórir, who started to become filled with berserk fury in battles as he aged. At the same time, he became very hard to deal with and greedy. His great stash of gold disappears without anyone knowing where it could be (*Þorskfirðinga saga*, 221,223), suggesting that, like Skalla-Grímr and his son Egill, who both hide their gold chests from their descendants before they die in *Egils saga* (174, 297–298), Gull-Þórir himself has hidden it to prevent anyone else from getting access to it. Later, as his son dies, he is so bereaved that he vanishes and nothing more is ever heard of him. It is possible that he was assumed to have died, but nothing is known of the manner of his death, and consequently, there may have been

suspicion that he died deliberately – or perhaps he became an undead entity, in that instead of dying he shifted his shape. Namely, according to the saga “people believe that he turned into a dragon, and lay down on his gold chests” (*þat hafa men fyrir satt, at hann hafi at dreka orðit ok hafi lagzt á gullkistur sína*), and later men have said that they have seen a dragon flying over the district. (*Þorskfirðinga saga*, 226. Trans. Anthony Maxwell in Hreinsson 1997 (III), 359).

At first glance the two sagas suggest that both Gull-Þórir and the maiden king are capable of shifting their shape (*skipta hömum/hamask*) and, accordingly, they were considered similarly *hamrammir*, like Kveld-Úlfr above. Shape-shifting has been studied in greater depth by Dag Strömbäck (2000, 160–173), among others, and is a common theme in sagas, but the idea of turning into a dragon is fairly exotic, although it occurs in some other Legendary sagas as well. The majority of the animals whose shape is taken by people in sagas were more familiar to medieval Scandinavians, such as whales, boars, sows, various birds, wolves, foxes, bulls or dogs (Strömbäck 2000, 164–165). Relevant for this study is not whether medieval Icelanders believed that such shape-shifting could take place, but that in both *Yngvars saga* and *Þorskfirðinga saga* people who express greed are thought to exert posthumous influence on the district where they were buried or died.

In saga literature dragons that guarded their hoards of gold and of whose human origin was sometimes implied were also associated with greed, the dragon Fáfnir whom the hero Sigurðr slays being the best known example. Similarly, as noted earlier, the sagas also include several stories of revenants and ‘mound-dwellers’ who guard their great treasures in their mounds. (Evans 2005, 250–269; Jakobsson 2010). Both dragons and saga revenants are associated with greed, including the above-mentioned Hrappr, whom the greed motivates to return and watch over his interests. (Jakobsson 2005 and 2010).

Yngvars saga and *Þorskfirðinga saga* imply that both Gull-Þórir and the pagan princesses suffered from greed, suggesting a further link with the avaricious dragons and revenants. Accordingly, in the light of *Yngvars saga* and *Þorskfirðinga saga* people who committed suicide or otherwise could be interpreted to have died deliberately (or change their shape) could become posthumously active, especially if they were motivated by greed.

To return to Haki the berserk discussed above, his greed is not explicitly mentioned. As discussed above in the light of other saga literature, however, he would have been expected to possess skills similar to other berserks who were *hamrammir* and, as a man with *megin*, to possess the urge to reclaim his wealth and wife, even though he had already entered the afterlife. To keep the berserk peaceful, he was buried close to water, which was assumed to protect people outside the shore district.

Conclusion

In medieval Iceland suicide corpses were not regarded as inherently dangerous or even potentially dangerous. According to the law, suicides were to be buried outside the churchyard. However, the main aim may have been to exclude the self-killer from society even in death. Repentance before the actual moment of death could still make burial in the churchyard possible, and at least at this stage the suicide corpse was no longer a threat to the living. This practice naturally echoes the doctrine of the Church and would not necessarily suffocate old beliefs among lay people. The burial of Haki discussed above may represent such beliefs.

According to the sources under scrutiny here, suicide was not necessarily expected to result in posthumous restlessness. As earlier studies have claimed, none of the restless corpses in sagas appear to be suicides. In this study I have argued,

however, that suicide as such was not a manner of death that prevented the dead from returning. Instead, there are some exceptions in sagas which suggest that some of suicide corpses were expected to be dangerous to the living (although their posthumous restlessness is not explicitly indicated or realized in the text), but *not* because the person had committed suicide. Such people shared characteristics with other saga revenants. People who had committed suicide and could be ascribed the potency to return posthumously were strong-willed people who were thought to have special skills, such as ability to change shape, or berserks, and who were motivated to return because of unfinished business. They were often malicious, unsociable, selfish and greedy in nature. The medieval Icelandic suicides who were considered weak and powerless, including most women and old people as well as children and slaves, were not expected to have the will or strength to return that was required for posthumous activity. In other words, suicide as such made no one posthumously restless, but some suicides apparently were expected to return because they had authority and strength of will in life that made their coming back possible. What mattered was the character of the person in life, not whether he or she deliberately chose to end his or her life.

In this study, I have only scratched the surface of the subject and a lot remains to be made of the history of medieval Icelandic suicide. For instance, in the law enacted for Icelanders by the Norwegian king known as the *Jónsbók* law from 1281, suicide was explicitly criminalized for the first time in Iceland and was handled under the heading of *níðingsverk*. Confiscation of property was declared as its punishment. This decree was strongly opposed by Bishop Árni Þorláksson (*Jónsbók*, 41–42; Lárusson 1960, 83; Fenger 1985, 63), which raises questions for future research into changing attitudes on suicide and whether they are tangent with possible changes (or continuity) in beliefs concerning posthumous restlessness of suicides.

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