The Transmutation of the Draugr:

Christianizing Icelandic Mythology

By Kathrine Esten

Departments: History and Political Science

Abstract:

If the dead will not stay dead, what can you count on? The better question may be: Why aren't the dead staying dead? In this essay, I examine the *draugr* (pl. draugar), an undead creature of pagan Norse origin, as described before and after the adoption of Christianity in Iceland in 1000 CE. Featured prominently in pre-conversion folklore, the draugr often symbolized Icelandic fears of isolation, starvation, and darkness. However, *The Sagas of Icelanders,* written in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, features a reimagined draugr. Intentionally, post-conversion draugar return from the dead in accordance with Catholic practice or lack thereof. The transmutation of the pagan draugr into a religious symbol took place to benefit ecclesiastical authority. Combining psychological and literary analysis of the draugr with historic developments in Iceland and the Catholic Church, I argue that Christian authors manipulated mythology to reaffirm Church authority in a troubled political time.

Introduction

If the dead will not stay dead, what can you count on? In the late medieval period (approximately 1100-1400 CE), the Catholic Church — the preeminent authority in the West — viewed death as a conclusion to an earthly life, allowing passage from this world to the next. This belief shaped the final hours of life, placing an emphasis on the last chance to repent and seek forgiveness from God.[127] In Iceland, the *krisnitaka*, the formal adoption of Christianity by the Althing (Icelandic parliament) took place in the year CE 999 or 1000.[128] Yet in *The Sagas of*

[127] Chris Sparks, "Death," in *Heresy, Inquisition and Life Cycle in Medieval Languedoc*, (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 123-150.

[128] Jenny Jochens, "Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000." *Speculum* 74, no. 3 (1999): 635.

Icelanders, written during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the *draugr* (pl. draugar) — an undead creature of pagan Norse origin — disobeys the laws of God and disrupts the natural order simply by returning from the dead. Draugar of *Sagas*, however, differ significantly from those of the pre-Christian era; *Sagas* draugar return from the dead in accordance with Catholic practice or lack thereof. The transmutation of the pagan draugr into a religious symbol took place to benefit exxlesiastical authority. With a modified mythos, Christian authors re-envisioned Icelandic history using Catholic doctrine.

Pagan and psychological origins of draugar

The earliest written sources on the pagan mythos of Iceland and other European countries rely on oral tradition. As a result, written sources are inevitably confounded by Christian influence, making it difficult to decipher which features are pagan and which are Christian. In his *Encyclopedia of Norse and Germanic Folklore, Mythology, and Magic*, French historian Claude Lecouteux relies on the work of medieval mythographers who compiled the myths of central and northern Europe after the twelfth century. Lecouteux acknowledges the difficulty isolating pagan features in Christian accounts, noting that "paganism and the Christian faith were commingled" during the late medieval period.[129] To counter the effect of medieval Christian belief on the work, Lecouteux references archaeological evidence of grave sites. Lecouteux's entry on draugar, based on these sources, describes a draugr as a "double" of a dead man, keeping his body but not his mind. He attributes its creation to an individual being "upset with his fate." To get rid of a draugr,

[129] Claude Lecouteux, *Encyclopedia of Norse and Germanic Folklore, Mythology, and Magic,* trans. Jon E. Graham (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 2016), 13.

it is necessary to burn the corpse completely or decapitate it. Archaeology, Lecouteux notes, provides ample evidence of fear of draugar in Norse and Germanic countries: archaeologists discovered "mutilated cadavers" — decapitated corpses with the head placed near the feet — in pagan graves; other corpses "have been bound so they could not return to trouble the living."[130]

Nora K. Chadwick, an English medievalist who studies early Celtic history, takes a different approach to isolating pagan roots. While she focuses on *Sagas*, Chadwick also draws information from similar undead creatures in Celtic folklore as early Icelandic settlement included both Norse and Celtic persons. The folklore, written prior to the sixth-century conversion of the Celts to Christianity, offers another potential source of inspiration for Icelandic draugar.[131] Chadwick focuses more closely on the physical appearance of the draugr; unlike most Western undead beings — ghosts or revenants — the draugr is a mischievous, animated corpse, with a corporeal body. The corporeal Celtic undead creatures, including the *fear gorta* and *sluagh*, preyed on men and cattle.[132] Ascribing this feature to the draugr, Chadwick concludes the pagan draugr similarly intended to eat the remains of their victims.[133]

Pagan draugar, as described in archaeological evidence, comparative Celtic stories, and traditional folklore, exist separately from the society of the living but maintain a human appearance.[134] Draugar attacks occur unexpectedly at night; defeating draugar requires wit, decapitation, and a return to the safety of society. These observations suggest an overarching

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[130] Lecouteux, *Encyclopedia of Norse and Germanic Folklore*, 69.

[131] N.K. Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," *Folklore* 57, no. 2 (1947): 50

[132] Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," 50; Jón Árnason and Magnús Grímsson, *Ghosts, Witchcraft and the Other World: Icelandic folktales I*, trans. Alan Boucher (Reykjavik: Iceland Review, 1977), 7.

[133] Chadwick, "Norse Ghosts," 50; Árnason and Grimsson, *Ghosts,* 8.

[134] B.S. Benedikz, "Basic Themes in Icelandic Folklore," *Folklore*, vol. 84, no. 1 (1973): 8.

approach to the pre-Christian draugr: psychology. In the late nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud established two primal instincts in humanity: Eros, the life instinct including sex, thirst, and hunger, and its counterpart, Thanatos, the death drive. Freud characterized the latter instinct as "destructive." Self-destruction is only prevented when Thanatos is balanced with Eros.[135] Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst in the mid-twentieth century, revisited the concept of Thanatos while developing the Lacanian death drive. According to Lacan, human beings derive pleasure from the death drive. The moment of loss is the closest the subject will ever get to their true desire of death. The experience of loss can be repeated, while death, in its finality, is only enjoyed once.[136]

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek developed his concept of the "undead urge" from the Freudian and Lacanian approaches. Žižek suggests the creation of undead beings results from the "terrifying 'inhuman' or 'undead' core" of our innermost being. The undead are free from social structure and loyalties, existing in the freedom and immortality all humans innately desire.[137] While Žižek discusses the undead urge in a modern context, it is possible to apply this same approach to the early Icelanders. Isolation from Europe, the island's natural environment, and dark and endlessly long winter nights threatened Icelanders living in a "bleak and sometimes barely habitable land."[138] Pondering the undead provided early Icelanders with a form of defense against the unknown dangers of the new territory while also giving into the undead urge. The universality of the undead urge adds a new dimension to draugar. With everyone possessing an undead urge,

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[135] Sigmund Freud and Fabian X. Schupper, "On Love and The Death-Drive," *American Imago, vol. 24 no. 3* (1964), 9.

[136] Marika Rose, "The Death Drive From Freud to Žižek," in *A Theology of Failure: Žižek against Christian Innocence* (New York: Fordham University, 2019), 60.

[137] Sarah Juliet Lauro, "Slavoj Žižek, the Death Drive, and Zombies: A Theological Account," in *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 94-96.

[138] Árnason and Grimsson, *Ghosts,* 11.

anyone could potentially become a draugr after their demise.[139] Pagan draugar existed to frighten the living, but also to give in to an innate, destructive desire within. The abject mix of fear and pleasure in imagining draugar roaming communities at night granted a purpose to life as a member of civilization in pagan Iceland.

The draugr of *Sagas* and evidence of Christian influence

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, anonymous authors put into writing a series of oral traditions collectively known as *The Sagas of Icelanders*, or *Islendingasögur*, in the Icelandic vernacular rather than Latin, the language of the Church.[140] This divergence from its Western counterparts is the first indication of the unique nature of *Sagas*. As prose novels, the sagas stray away from purely religious content to "deal with the everyday life" of great families and individuals in the previous four centuries with a large emphasis on heroism and warrior values.[141]

Icelandic culture changed significantly in the intervening centuries between the events described in *Sagas* and the text's writing. Regarding the subject of the draugr, the change of greatest consequence is the formal adoption of Christianity. While the authors of the work are anonymous, the sagas were likely transcribed by men associated directly with the Church as clergy or laypeople. At the very least, the authors were almost certainly educated within the Church. In nearly all saga, Christian practices or churchgoing are mentioned, but it is in those Sagas which

[139] James McFarland. "Philosophy of the Living Dead: At the Origin of the Zombie-Image." *Cultural Critique* 90 (2015), 24.

[140] Sigurdur A. Magnusson, "The Icelandic Sagas," in *Northern Sphinx: Iceland and the Icelanders from the Settlement to the Present* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 82.

[141] Magnusson, "The Icelandic Sagas," 109.

take place after the *krisnitaka* where the authors "present an almost complete cessation of pagan practices" in an attempt to Christianize the stories.[142] During the "Golden Age" of saga writing (the second half of the thirteenth century), two sagas — *Grettis Saga* and *Eyrbyggja Saga* — followed narratives of heroes who interacted with or fought against draugar. *Grettis* and *Eyrbyggja* also feature several instances of Catholic practice and symbolism providing evidence of the transmutation of the pagan undead.

Grettis Saga

Written at the start of the fourteenth century, *Grettis Saga* takes place in the first three decades after the *krisnitaka*; the society of *Grettis* is thus a Christian society. Grettir the Strong, the titular character, is the only major saga hero of the eleventh century not to fully experience life prior to the transition, as he was only four years old in 1000 A.D. Grettir is described as a man of immense strength and courage, famous for killing savage men, and later, for defeating malevolent spirits. However, Grettir spends the final years of his life as an outlaw, rapidly losing his strength and growing afraid of the dark.[143] In his 1965 translation, G.A. Hight claims the original author failed to explain the central question of Grettir's downfall: why would a successful defender of Icelandic society be condemned? Hight concludes Grettir is one of the final vestiges of 'warrior culture' in Iceland who campaigns for the newly established faith in his own way — taking on heathen supernatural beings. His demise is the result of destiny, suggesting that any association

[142] Bernadine McCreesh, "How Pagan Are the Icelandic Family Sagas?" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 79, no. 1 (1980): 59.

[143] G.A. Hight, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1965).

with paganism did not belong in a world dominated by Christianity.[144] Hight's illustration of Grettir as a 'warrior' is well-supported in the text, with repeated emphasis on his strength, courage, wit, and aggression from his first successful kill at the age of fourteen to his brave encounter with a draugr, Glam, in the 35th chapter.[145] His status as a monster fighter places him on the margins of society, socially isolated from his fellow men as a draugr is from all living men.[146]

Understanding Grettir's narrative as one of a failure of character, let us now consider the draugr of *Grettis Saga*, Glam. Unlike Grettir, Glam is not a native to the island, but a recent immigrant from Sweden, which was a pagan country in the eleventh century. In fact, the conversion of Sweden occurred over the course of the twelfth century. The thirteenth century author, aware of this late conversion, references Sweden to establish Glam as backwards.[147] Glam is known for his strong distaste of the church. He "abstained from mass" and on the eve of Yule, demanded food while all other men were fasting. When refused, Glam insists "the ways of men seemed to me better when they were called heathen. I want my food and no foolery."[148] Glam faced immediate consequences for his dismissal of religion. While the rest of the community attended Christmas Mass, Glam goes missing while tending his sheep and was later found dead. All the burial attempts at a nearby church fail: oxen wouldn't carry the body and priests couldn't approach it. Eventually, Glam was buried without a Christian burial.[149]

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[144] Hight, *Grettir*, vii-ix.

[145] Hight, *Grettir*, 65, 95.

[146] Armann Jakobsson, "The Fearless Vampire Killers: A Note about the Icelandic Draugr and Demonic Contamination in Grettis Saga," *Folklore*, vol. 120, no. 3 (2009), 310.

[147] Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia:Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 103.

[148] Hight, *Grettir,* 88-89.

[149] Hight, *Grettir,* 90.

As in life, Glam is unable to be part of Christian society after death. His hastened burial is not final. His return, evidenced by broken house-tops, deceased cattle, and a murdered shepherd ("every bone in his body torn from its place"), caused a panic in the neighborhood and leaves the district "in grievous condition."[150] Not unlike the pagan draugr, Glam is prone to murder and his destructive nature defines him.

When Grettir battled Glam, he steps outside of his Christian society. When Grettir first decides to challenge Glam, his kinsman Jokull warned him it is much better to fight "with human men than with goblins of that sort." By separating "human men" from draugar, Jokull identified a fundamental line between socially acceptable violence (with other men) and unacceptable battles (with monsters). Grettir dismissed the warning immediately, reiterating the dangers of pride and arrogance which eventually doom him.[151] The fight itself echoes the pagan belief of society as a form of protection. The fight began inside a house, providing an allegory for being a part of society and civilization; Glam eventually pulled the fight outside, into the snow. In the passage, the moonlight shines into Glam's eyes, a sight Grettir later described as "the only thing which ever made him tremble."[152] However, a religious dimension is added to this sense of safety. Grettir managed to decapitate Glam — a pagan execution — but thanks God for his success. It is not merely society which conquers over the dead, but Christian society which does so.[153]

Despite defeating a creature which society had condemned as evil and ungodly, Grettir's service to the faith did not save him. Glam's final curse told Grettir his "deeds shall turn to evil

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[150] Hight, *Grettir*, 91-93.

[151] Hight, *Grettir*, 95.

[152] Hight, *Grettir,* 99.

[153] Hight, *Grettir,* 99.

and [his] guardian-spirit shall forsake [him.]" After laying Glam's decapitated head between the corpse's thighs, Grettir reflected on the curse and states he has "even less discretion than before, and was more impatient of being crossed." Later, he became so afraid of the dark, he wouldn't venture out at night. The memory of Glam's eyes haunted Grettir for the rest of his life.[154]

The dynamic between Glam and Grettir calls back to pagan and viking origins, with an emphasis on violence and fighting for glory.[155] While Glam dies, Grettir resorted to violent pagan methods (decapitation and mutilation) to kill him. Grettir, living on the fringes of society as a vanquisher of supernatural beings, is the subject of his own tragedy; he plays the hero in a society which has outgrown the ancient warrior ethic.

Eyrbyggja Saga

Eyrbyggja Saga, the Saga of the Ere-Dwellers, follows the development of the Snæfellsnes peninsula from the ninth century to eleventh century: from "the pagan anarchy of the Viking Age" to the arrival of Christianity and gradual establishment of "ordered civilisation."[156] Multiple translators speculate the anonymous author wrote *Eyrbyggja* in the mid-thirteenth century, earlier than *Grettis*.[157] The localized setting of *Eyrbyggja* allows further speculation on the anonymous author. Lee M. Hollander suggests the man was part of the upper class of society and received his training at the Augustinian monastery then located in nearby Helgafell. Given the depth of

[154] Hight, *Grettir*, 100.

[155] Hight, *Grettir*, 95.

[156] Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, (Edinburgh: Southside Publishers LTD., 1973), 11-12.

[157] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 12.; Paul Schack and Lee M. Hollander, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1959), xvi.

knowledge of the peninsula's terrain demonstrated in the work, Hollander assumes the author is a native of the peninsula.[158] Hermann Palsson and Paul Edwards, in their 1973 translation, make similar claims the translator was native to the Snæfellsnes peninsula and likely composed the work at Helgafell, and posit that priests may have completed the work, as numerous manuscripts of other sagas (not including *Eyrbyggja*) exist at the monastery.[159]

In tracing the development of the Snæfellsnes peninsula, *Eyrbyggja* shapes its narrative with the real-life ending in mind — the widespread adoption of Christianity. The two draugar featured in the saga, Thorolf Halt-Foot and Thorgunna, serve as catalysts for communities to recognize the importance of a Christian life, and both are ultimately banished using both legal and religious procedure.

THOROLF TWIST-FOOT

Thorolf Twist-Foot (alternatively called Halt-Foot or Lame-Foot) shares Grettir's traits of aggression and strength. Described as a "great viking" from early childhood, Thorolf earns his surname after challenging a childless neighbor for his land. Thorolf kills the neighbor, but injures his leg in the process, walking with a limp for the rest of his life.[160] With age, Thorolf grows more violent, engaging in frequent physical and verbal disputes with his neighbors and his son, Arnkel.[161]

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[158] Schack and Hollander, *Eyrbyggja*, xvi-xviii.

[159] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 13-15.

[160] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 45.

[161] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 104-106.

Thorolf's final disagreement places his narrative squarely in a Christian context as it is with a priest, Snorri. The priest takes Krakaness wood from land which Thorolf claims. Snorri defends the action when confronted, noting Thorolf gifted the land to the Church to resolve an earlier dispute. After Arnkel refuses to help him fight the priest, Thorolf "went back home in a fury." Without uttering a word to anybody, Thorolf sits in his high-seat throughout the night and is found dead in the same spot the next morning with his eyes still open.[162]

Thorolf's return as a draugr is similar to Glam's return. After sunset "no-one out of doors was left in peace" and the oxen are "ridden to death by demons." A shepherd is found with "every bone in his body broken," a perfect parallel to the first murder Glam commits in *Grettis Saga*.[163] Considering both Glam and Thorolf, a few dominant traits of saga draugar emerge. First, both are darkened corpses which emerge at night to terrorize the living. Second, both were aggressive during their lifetimes. Third, both are particularly prone to commit brutal murders. These characterizations are more violent than those seen in the pagan era, which emphasizes the contrast between civilized life and savage undead.

While Arnkel intervenes to rebury Thorolf's body behind a high wall, Thorolf returns again as a draugr following Arnkel's death. In this second passage, Thorolf is so aggressive in hunting people that he "wouldn't stop until he'd cleared everything from the neighbourhood, men, beasts, and all."[164] The new landowner, Thorodd, burns Thorolf's corpse on a pyre on the beach as part of a religious ceremony, but a strong wind prevents him from throwing all the ashes into the sea. The latter half of Thorolf's story is decidedly less Christianized than the former portion. A cow licks

[162] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 113-114.

[163] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 115.

[164] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 186-187.

the ashes off stones in a pasture, leading to the birth of a demon bull calf. Thorodd ignores warnings to kill the beast; the bull later uses its horns to skewer Thorodd before it disappears into the ground.[165]

Thorolf's instigation of quarrels is the equivalent to stepping away from society and the safety which it offers, leading to his death; this explanation would fall closer in line with the pagan origins of the draugr. However, I believe Thorolf's penchant for violence to achieve property and his dispute with a priest are the primary causes for his return from death. His return prompts the community to join together and rely on religious ceremonies to protect the living. As with *Grettis Saga*, Thorolf's episode signals the end of the pagan viking era. Thorolf's community, scarred by the supernatural, embraces faith and fellowship for safety rather than returning to the violence of paganism.

THORGUNNA

As a Christian, Thorgunna is unique among the draugar of *Sagas*. In her first mention in *Eyrbyggja*, Thorgunna is described as a Celtic immigrant from the archipelago of Hebrides; she arrives "in the summer that Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland."[166] Unlike Glam's origin country of Sweden, Thorgunna's homeland of Ireland converted to Christianity during the sixth and seventh centuries, earlier than the *krisnitaka*.[167] Violence is not present in Thorgunna's

[165] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 190-192.

[166] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 156.

[167] Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth,* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

personality either. Thorgunna's faith in the Church is her dominant trait with her "proper" manner and daily attendance at mass.[168]

Thorgunna's final requests indicate influence on the part of *Eyrbyggja*'s thirteenth century author. After learning of her forthcoming death from a black cloud raining blood, Thorgunna makes several requests to her neighbor and landlord, Farmer Thorodd: to take her body to Skalholt, to give her golden ring to the church, and to burn her fine bedclothes. While the final two requests are given without specific reason, Thorgunna explains she would like to be buried in Skalholt because she believes "it will soon become the most venerated place in all the land" and she knows "there are priests there to sing Mass."[169] The inclusion of Skalholt is prescient when credited to Thorgunna, but obvious when credited to the thirteenth-century author. A footnote in Palsson's and Edwards' translation notes that in 1056, Skalholt became the seat of the first native Icelandic bishop, remaining an episcopate until the end of the eighteenth century.[170] An explicit reference to the rise of Christianity calls to mind the overall Christian narrative of this saga.

Thorodd's failure to complete all three requests causes Thorgunna to return as a draugr. Thorodd's wife, Thurid, begs him not to destroy the fine bedclothes, and he eventually agrees to only destroy a portion of the bedclothes. While he attempts to deliver the body and gold ring to Skalholt, a heavy storm forces the funeral party to stop at a farm called Nether Ness in Stafholfstungur. Here, the Nether Ness farmer refuses to grant hospitality to the travelers. During the night, Thorgunna rises as a draugr and prepares food for the funeral party from the farmer's stores. The farmer immediately apologizes for not offering hospitality to the funeral party, and

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[168] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 158.

[169] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 160.

[170] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 160.

Thorgunna disappears.[171] From this episode, we can understand Thorgunna's return as a form of warning. The farmer, in refusing the funeral party, denied members of his community; the appearance of a draugr made him reconsider his actions and act in a more welcoming, Christian manner.

However, the continued existence of the bedclothes haunts Thorodd and his workers throughout the winter. Shortly after Thorgunna is buried at Skalholt, a shepherd returns home "badly shaken"; he is found dead two weeks later and eventually returns as a draugr. Thorir, another resident of the house, goes "out to the privy" at night, but the undead shepherd stops him from returning. A few days later, Thorir appears with the shepherd. This pattern continues until six more are dead.[172] The deaths in this portion of *Eyrbyggja* are less gory than the bone-breaking imagery seen with Thorolf and Glam. Rather than terrifying the living into retaliation, these deaths warn the living to correct their mistakes.

During the Christmas season, Thorodd's return as a draugr disrupts the safety of the home, prompting the living to seek help. While catching fish for winter stores, Thorodd and five other men drown; "The boat and fish were washed ashore….but the bodies were never found," adding to the sense of fear and dread in the community. At the funeral feast for the sailors, Thorodd and his companions arrive, "drenched to the skin." The guests at the feast take it as a good omen, which the author credits to a pagan belief still popular in the area: if drowned people had been accepted by Ran, goddess of the sea, they would appear at their own funeral feast.[173] However, the author dismisses the pagan notion as an explanation. Instead, the author emphasizes the inhuman actions

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[171] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 162.

[172] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 166.

[173] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 166.

of the draugar, who ignore the greetings of the living and sit silently in front of the fire. For several weeks, the dead men arrive to sit by the fire in the living room. The living build a second fire in another room in order to stay warm, prompting the author to stress the dead and living cannot cohabitate. By mid-winter, six servants die and join the shepherd's and Thorir's groups of draugar. Five remaining servants run away, frightened of the draugar. Eventually, the cause of the numerous draugar is revealed to be Thorgunna's bedclothes, which are in Thurid's possession.[174]

The hauntings on the farm are resolved through both religious and legal intervention. The farm's remaining residents seek out Snorri (the same priest from Thorolf's episode) for advice. He orders the survivors to burn Thorgunna's bedclothes and hold a legal trial against Thorir and Thorodd for "trespassing on the home and robbing people of life and health." Eventually, all the draugar are summoned and are allowed to give testimony; a jury banishes the draugar from the home. After all the draugar leave, Snorri encourages the household to carry holy water to every corner of the house and celebrate mass, and the hauntings end.[175]

Thorgunna's portion of *Eyrbyggja* lacks the explicit violence seen in Thorolf's episodes and *Grettis Saga*, but has perhaps the closest connection to Christianity out of all draugar narratives. Thorolf and Glam, through their ill tempers, were responsible for their own fate in returning as draugar, but Thorgunna's return is the result of failures within the community — specifically, failures of faith. In disrespecting the final wishes of their Christian neighbor, Thorodd and Thurid ultimately doomed over a dozen men to the fate of becoming draugar. The effect is only reversed once all of Thorgunna's wishes are fulfilled.

[174] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 169.

[175] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 169-170.

This narrative bridges Iceland's pagan past and Christian present, suggesting influence from the thirteenth century author. The legal trial and subsequent religious ceremony are undeniably a departure from the previous method of dealing with draugar in *Grettis Saga,* earlier in *Eyrbyggja Saga,* and in pagan folklore (decapitation or burning). Palsson and Edwards claim the combination of "the old law and the new religion" acts as an "exorcism" for the world of vikings."[176] While the defeats of Glam and Thorolf symbolize the death of paganism, the trial is the strongest example of a community moving forward. Alexander Hay makes a similar analysis; the community moves past the notion of guilt, leading to an "immersal in faith and the rejection of a troubling pagan past."[177] The fact that *Eyrbyggja Saga* concludes with the widespread conversion to Christianity cannot be overlooked in assessing this argument. Thorgunna, as a draugr, pushes a community to reconsider the way it operates and to question the pagan traditions still present in society. Building up to the Christian-focused ending, the author shapes the trial to provide a peaceful means of society moving forward, with an emphasis on legal order and structured faith.

Christianizing with a purpose: Church gains from transmutation

Grettis Saga and *Eyrbyggja Saga* provide ample evidence that the thirteenth and fourteenth century draugr is distinct from the draugr preceding the krisnitaka. These examples also prove the permeation of Christian values, symbols, and moral messages, permitting the assertion that oral

[176] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 19.

[177] Alexander Hay, ""From Beneath the Waves": Sea-Draugr and the Popular Conscience," in *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture*, edited by Hackett Jon and Harrington Seán. Bloomington, IN, USA: Indiana University Press, 2018, 13.

tradition fundamentally changed as a result of Christian influence. In approaching the claim that Church authority intended Christianization, I conjecture the Church leadership in Iceland stood to gain significantly from these changes.

The Sagas of Icelanders re-envision Icelandic history with a romantic, Christian leaning. Palsson and Edwards describe *Eyrbyggja Saga* as a historical record "on the surface," but state its "true spirit is imaginative and interpretative, a thirteenth-century view of the past."[178] In saying this, Palsson and Edwards capture a potential motivation for why the sagas were written down with explicit references to Christianity: to make it appear as though Christianity was not merely a choice of the Althing in 1000 AD, but inevitable in Iceland's development.

While the krisnitaka did recognize Christianity as the official religion of Iceland, conversion was not immediate among all residents. In the twelfth-century *Íslendingabók*, Ari Thorgilsson references compromises the Althing made at the time of krisnitaka, allowing continued pagan ritual after the adoption of Christianity. Exceptions included continued sacrifices to the gods, eating horse meat, and even exposing unwanted children to the elements, three practices explicitly in violation against Christian teachings.[179] Instead of acknowledging the very gradual and long-term acceptance of Christianity in Iceland, the sagas push a narrative that conversion was a foregone conclusion.

Assuming the anonymous authors are associated with the Church, the draugr provides an attractive model to Christianize the eleventh century. According to this explanation, Glam and Thorolf Twist-Foot are not merely undead people wreaking havoc on the living. Instead, the men

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[178] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 11.

[179] Winroth, *The Conversion*, 135.

are social pariahs who refused to live in accordance with the will of the Lord. Their return signals that those still practicing paganism are in the wrong; the dead have returned as proof.[180] Thorgunna's story as a draugr takes a similar but slightly different approach to reshaping history. Her return suggests conversion is not where Christianization ends; values such as hospitality and respecting the wishes of the dead need to be upheld for society to persist. The trial in *Eyrbyggja* can also be interpreted to support this explanation; the survivors use holy water and Christian relics to remove the spirits of pagan undead creatures.[181]

Yet, referring back to Palsonn's and Edwards' interpretation of the trial as a mix of old legal tradition with new Christian religious practice, it is much more convincing to view the trial as a peaceful solution to pagan violence. The survivors on the farm were not seeking to battle unknown and dangerous forces, but restore a sense of security and protection. The legal system and religious ritual provided this closure. This conclusion raises a significant question: why would the Church manipulate myth to make itself appear as a solution to unwanted violence?

Political upheaval defined a significant portion of the "Golden Age" of saga writing, shaping the perspective of saga authors and their immediate audiences. From 1230 to 1262, around the time an anonymous author wrote *Eyrbyggja*, the Age of Sturlungs placed natural and agricultural resources of the island under a great degree of stress. A small number of wealthy Icelandic families (including the Sturlungs), the Icelandic and Norwegian churches, and the

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[180] Hight, *Grettir*, 98.;Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 104-106.

[181] Palsson and Edwards, *Eyrbyggja*, 104-106.

Norwegian monarchy fought for political dominance on the island; ongoing climate deterioration and volcanic activity further added to the island's chaos.[182]

If members of the Church sought to bring a peaceful conclusion to the Age of Sturlungs, altering *Eyrbyggja Saga* to reflect Christian values intertwined with a stable legal system may have been a tempting strategy. This ideal end to the Age of Sturlungs hinged on the Icelandic Church maintaining control. Starting in the mid-twelfth century, the Icelandic Church received tithes, protection under the law, and the ability to independently train clergy. If the Norwegian Church or monarchy gained power in Iceland, these benefits would be lost for the Icelandic Church.[183] If the draugr - particularly a foreign draugr - disrupts the natural and social order in the same way as political upheaval, the peaceful conclusion to *Eyrbyggja* is illustrative of the possibility of peace amidst violence; peace can be found through relying on the traditions of legal structure and church authority, as demonstrated in the trial in *Eyrbyggja*.

While the author of *Eyrbyggja* framed their narrative around the Church and the traditional Icelandic legal system as saviors, *Grettis Saga* is an acceptance of the end of the Commonwealth. Written in the early fourteenth century, the author of *Grettis Saga* had the knowledge that the Commonwealth of Iceland did not survive the violence and chaos, but instead submitted to Norwegian rule, beginning six and a half centuries of colonial status.[184]

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[182] Richard F. Tomasson, "The First New Society," in *Iceland: The First New Society*, 3-31. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 14.; William Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated as Unquiet Dead in the Sagas of the Icelanders," in *Monster Theory:*

Reading Culture, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 161.

[183] Sverrir Jakobsson, "Heaven is a Place on Earth: Church and Sacred Space in thirteenth-Century Iceland," *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 82, no. 1 (2010): 9

[184] Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated," 162.

Grettir's career parallels the developments of early Icelandic history. Just as settlement in Iceland began with a dramatic heroic age, Grettir starts his life as a warrior. Iceland grew into a stable commonwealth and Grettir became the strongest man alive, able to defend his values. Glam's final words, that Grettir "shall never grow stronger than [he] is now," suggest Iceland reached its peak in the eleventh century, as Christianity and warrior values overlapped.[185] However, Grettir's decline also mirrored that of his country. When the Althing sentences him to life as an outlaw, Grettir loses his place in lawful society. The Age of Sturlungs deprived Iceland of its structured legal system, as internal disputes over power dismantled the Althing. As Grettir tries to escape external threats hunting him down, Iceland attempts to survive Norwegian intervention. Just as Glam warned, both Iceland and Grettir "found it hard to live alone" and were dragged to their death — literal for Grettir, figurative for Iceland.[186]

Conclusion

Returning from the dead is a part of cross-cultural and cross-temporal imagination. Žižek's "undead urge" explains this phenomenon through psychology; human beings fear the finality of death, but seek the freedom death and resurrection provide. For thirteenth and fourteenth century saga authors, the undead serves as an opportunity to Christianize the past. Numerous motivations for Christianization existed; the authors may have intended to affirm existing Church authority, encourage reliance on Icelandic civil and religious tradition, or accept the loss of Iceland's

[185] Hight, *Grettis*, 99.; Sayers, "The Alien and Alienated," 163.

[186] Hight, *Grettis*, 99.

independence. Regardless, the transmutation of the draugr allowed Icelanders to kill their pagan past. With this death came freedom; Iceland emerged as a Christian society.

If the dead will not stay dead, what can you count on? The better question to ask here is why the dead are not staying in their graves. In the pagan era, Icelanders struggled against abstract and unknown dangers in a new environment; the draugar supplied a physical substitute which the living could vanquish and overcome. As evidenced in *Sagas,* an unsettling past and disturbing present is re-imagined through a monster which can be defeated by civilized society. In the modern era, the draugr is depicted as a vicious, warrior zombie which requires violent attack to subdue. In the video game franchise *Skyrim* and George R.R. Martin's popular fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (and its television counterpart, *A Game of Thrones*), the draugr provides an opportunity for the hero to defeat another form of death.[187]

It is not difficult to find examples of trepidation *Skyrim* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* react to. With longer lifespans, higher survival rates, and the general safety available to many citizens of the Western world, *Skyrim* offers an escape into a supernatural world where death is around every corner. *A Song of Ice and Fire* deals openly with political intrigue, featuring wealthy families battle for power and control of a kingdom — oddly reminiscent of the Age of Sturlungs. The "White Walkers" of the books provide an existential threat to the petty squabbles, suggesting a desire of the author to move beyond the political tensions of modern national and global politics to consider an actual threat to human existence — climate change.

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[187] Fahey, Richard. "Zombies of the Frozen North: White Walkers and Old Norse Revenants." Medieval Studies Research Blog Meet Us at the Crossroads of Everything. March 5, 2018.

The dead return when the author senses a disturbance in the natural order, whether environmental danger, political upheaval, or disputes in civil society. The transmutation of the draugr offers a window into the challenges and anxieties of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. However, the draugr is only one of many examples of the undead in Europe and the world at large. By studying the undead, we can better understand the societies and people bringing them back to life.

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