

THE HORSE AND HIS HERO IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between horses and heroes in two stages of Old Norse literature: the earlier Viking Age poetry, and the later prose *Íslendingasögur*. The first chapter analyses three poems preserved in the *Prose Edda* that provide evidence for a heroic corpus in which horses were understood to have an important role, and suggests that the names of horses combined the physicality of the horse with the ideals of a warrior culture. The second chapter looks at heroic poetry from the *Poetic Edda*, and suggests the relationship between the horse and eddic hero signifies the ability of the hero to take part in the heroic “economy of honour”, and the worth of his heroic achievements. The third chapter, and second section of this thesis, examines this relationship in selected *Íslendingasögur*, concluding that although presented through different channels, the horse still assists the hero in the heroic “economy of honour” in ways that are appropriate for the medieval Icelandic hero. This thesis demonstrates that the symbolism of the horse is vital to the development and definition of the Old Icelandic hero, and suggests this importance may reflect the priorities of the Icelandic society in which these traditions were recorded.

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INTRODUCTION

While scholars have discussed the hero time and time again with relation to Old Norse sources, very limited attention has been given to the function of the horse in heroic narratives. Such anthropocentrism seems misguided, as continuing studies in other disciplines suggest animals contribute to the shaping of personal identities and social consciousness, and act as a mirror of human behaviour and abilities.¹ A society's attitude towards animals can reveal how it conceptualises power and social identity, and the horse is a key example of an animal in a symbiotic relationship with humans.² Since their domestication, horses have been kept in close proximity to tribal life, and become partners to the men who keep them.³ Named and treated as "quasi humans," the horse's prominent position in early society has naturally evolved to make the horse a focal point of myths, legends and heroic traditions.⁴

Although most famously revered for their seafaring skills, the peoples of the

¹ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 8, 10, 226. Paul Shepherd, *Traces of an Omnivore* (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1996), 3.

² Marc Bekoff, "Foreword," in *Humans and Other Animals* ed., Ariën Mack (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), ix.

³ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 66; Samantha Hurn, *Humans and Other Animals: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Interactions* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 66.

⁴ Hurn, *Humans and Other Animals*, 85; İlhan Başgög, "Proverb Image, Proverb Message, and Social Change," *Journal of Folklore Research* 30.2/3 (1993): 137-138.

Scandinavian medieval period were accomplished horsemen.⁵ In 866, 868-871, and 893, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles record the Danes acquiring horses on their landing in England, and in 892, 250 Danish ships specifically bring horses from Normandy.⁶ From inclusion in human burials, to elaborate iconography and ornamentation celebrating mythological sun-horses or warriors on the way to Valhöll, horses are common in the archaeological record of Scandinavia, and Viking Age representations of horses and horsemen are found on jewellery, brooches, armour, textiles and picture stones. These depictions suggest the well-trained horse was an important part of Scandinavian life, and this is reflected in medieval literary sources.⁷ Commonly used in skaldic poetry as part of kennings for ships, individualised, named horses appear in both skaldic and eddic poetry, and are later honoured in so-called *hestavísur* (horse-verses, c.1500 onward).⁸

Human-animal studies are currently at the forefront of scholarship concerning the medieval period. The two most important works regarding human-animal relations in Old Norse studies are Kristina Jennbert's *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion* (2011), and Lena Rohrbach's *Der Tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur* (2009). Jennbert's work examines the archaeological record for evidence of a pre-Christian Scandinavian society in which animals, particularly horses, exist in a symbiotic relationship with humans; such a relationship is extracted from the sagas by Rohrbach, and her

⁵ Andrea Miller, "Violent Vikings, Gentle Horsemen: The horse culture and practice of horsemanship in Viking Age Scandinavia" (BA diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2010), 11.

⁶ Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 5, 144.

⁷ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans: Recurrent Symbiosis in Archaeology and Old Norse Religion*, trans., Alan Crozier (Lund: Nordic Academic Press), 150.

⁸ Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature* (New York: John Hopkins Press, 1957), 83, 190. Jón Arason (1484-1550) was perhaps the first poet to compose a *hestavísa* about his horse, Móalingr.

discussions of *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa* have proved particularly useful for my discussion of these sagas in my third chapter.⁹ Sarah E. van der Hoek-Springer's PhD thesis, "Horses in the Viking Imagination" (2000), provides a catalogue of the iconographical contexts of Viking Age depictions of horses, as well as analysis of the role of Grani in the Sigurðr-cycle of eddic poems. However, while Hoek-Springer demonstrates the representative and companionable nature of the horse in her sources, she focuses only on the mythological and eddic use of horses. I disagree with Hoek-Springer's conclusion that the symbolism of horses falls out of the Viking imagination after such poetry and iconography, as demonstrated in the second half of this thesis, in my chapter on the *Íslendingasögur*.¹⁰ Ann Hyland's work on *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (1999) provides a useful starting point for research, although its use in practical application is limited due to the overwhelming bias given to the later middle ages. Andrea Miller's dissertation, however, "Violent Vikings, Gentle Horsemen: The Horse Culture and Practice of Horsemanship in Viking Age Scandinavia" (2010), focuses on the evidence for Viking Age Icelanders as natural horsemen, which requires an incredibly close and communicative bond between horse and rider.¹¹

Using such a title as I have adopted for this work, it is important to define exactly whom I refer to, and what I mean, when I use the word "hero" to describe a person or a concept. Although my usage varies from chapter to chapter, first and foremost a hero is the person with whom the horse has a bond of some form or other, be that a companionship, a sympathy with, or simple economic ownership. In my first

⁹ For a discussion of human-animal studies in other disciplines, see: Hurn, *Humans and Other Animals* and Arien Mack, ed., *Humans and Other Animals* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Sarah E. van der Hoek-Springer, "Horses in the Viking Imagination" (PhD diss., University of Nottingham, 2000), 249.

¹¹ Miller, "Violent Vikings, Gentle Horsemen," 46-47.

chapter, I refer to heroes in the traditional sense, as legendary, larger than life figures with whom the horse is associated; these legendary figures are again referred to in my second chapter. In my third chapter, however, the concept of the hero is multi-faceted, although often used to refer to the protagonist of the narrative episode under discussion.

Setting my work in the context of the works cited above, I aim to show that between the discussion of the saga hero, and the recent surge in animal-human studies with Old Norse sources, is the potential for an in-depth study of the way the relationship between men and horses can contribute to further debate on the development and changing definition of the Icelandic literary hero.

PLAN FOR THIS THESIS

The aim of this thesis is to approach the presentation and use of the horse-hero relationship in Old Norse literature in two stages. I shall first examine this relationship as presented in the poetic traditions of the Viking Age, and then analyse selected episodes from later prose narratives with the same focus. As a result of the separate skaldic and eddic nature of the poetic material, they are presented here in two distinct chapters (Chapters 1 and 2), and followed by a third chapter on the prose material. There are challenges with pursuing this kind of study, most importantly the difficulty of working with textual sources that are assumed to have roots in oral tradition. When doing so, it is important to distinguish between a dynamic oral event, and the material text that has recorded such an event. Attempting to recapture the original focus or function of a narrative must always be to some degree a speculative

act.¹² There is also the difficulty of applying a modern perspective to medieval sources, and ascribing the composer or scribe too little, or too much, authorial power. This thesis aims to discover whether Grani's devotion to Sigurðr in the eddic poetry is a unique occurrence, or whether named horses play an equally important role in other heroic narratives, especially in the later *Íslendingasögur*.

In my first chapter, I examine three previously understudied catalogue poems dealing with lists of horses from the Viking heroic tradition. There are among these *heiti*, names those that represent the horse's relationship with the ideal of a companion to the warrior, and narrative threads that suggest the importance of horses to the legendary heroic figure.¹³ I intend to establish a heroic vista in which horses played an important role, especially in close relation to the hero.

My second chapter examines the heroic poetry preserved in the *Poetic Edda*, especially focussing on the Sigurðr-cycle of poems, although with reference to the Helgi-cycle when such examples serve to illuminate or provide a basis for comparison with a study of Grani and Sigurðr. This chapter mainly looks at descriptions of riding or at reactions by the horse in response to the actions of its rider, and discusses a possible correlation between the emphasis on horse control in the poems, and the status of the hero.

The second half of this thesis is concerned with the *Íslendingasögur*, and examines a selection of later medieval sagas, dealing with the different words for horses used in these sagas, the correlation between horse descriptions and the characterisation of the hero, and the social symbolism of horse-fights and the exchange of horses in gifts. I also discuss the position of horses in the Icelandic law-

¹² Karl Reichl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 108.

¹³ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 73.

book *Grágás*, and the role of the horse in the “economy of honour” in which these heroes operate.

My primary sources consist of the poems *Kálfsvísa*, *Hesta heiti*, and *Þorgrímspula* from Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda*, the heroic poetry of the *Poetic Edda*, and selected *Íslendingasögur*. While dates are difficult to discern, except for a couple of prose exceptions, I base my analysis initially on the assumption that the poetry has been developed in an earlier stage of the Icelandic imagination than the medieval sagas.

CHAPTER 1

Riding to the ice: mapping the heroic tradition in three catalogue poems

This chapter is focussed on uncovering evidence for a Scandinavian heroic tradition in which horses played an important part. The legends of the “heroic age” were undoubtedly preserved primarily in oral traditions, although much has been lost in literary transmission. The eddic poetry discussed in the next chapter displays only a portion of the heroic corpus of legends circulating at the time of their original composition, as can be seen by references within the *Poetic Edda* to other, unknown poems. There are, however, *pulur*, versified lists of *heiti* (poetic synonyms for nouns), which are perhaps one of the oldest types of Old Norse poetry.¹⁴ These *pulur* provide a window into the fragmentary world of Scandinavian heroic traditions, containing as they do lists of heroes and their horses, many of which are merely known by name.¹⁵ A comparison may be made with the Old English catalogue poem *Widsiþ*, which also contains many names otherwise unknown. This suggests a large number of stories from the heroic legends of the Germanic tradition have perished, preserved only in

¹⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 31.

¹⁵ Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, 38.

such catalogue poems, which represent the core of these heroic narratives.¹⁶ Perhaps this is the case with the Scandinavian tradition. While the origin of these lists cannot be definitively ascertained, Margaret Clunies Ross suggests they acted as “versified aide-mémoires” for poets in the oral tradition.¹⁷ In the twelfth century, the popularity of the *pulur* as a source of poetic vocabulary increased, and many are preserved in Snorri's *Prose Edda*.¹⁸

These *pulur* reflect a long-lived tradition of information-preservation. As mentioned above, the Scandinavian heroic corpus contained many more heroes than simply those found in the eddic poems, although the surviving heroes were no doubt the most popular. H. M. Chadwick suggested that the information used in the composition of *Beowulf* reflects remarkably well-preserved stories of the lives of early kings of the Danes and the Swedes that can only have come to the composer through recited oral lore, most probably in the form of such lists.¹⁹ By identifying (or attempting to identify) the heroes named in these poems, and attempting to catalogue the meanings of the names of their horses, I can construct a heroic framework in which to place my subsequent analysis.²⁰

For this chapter I will look at three poems: *Kálfsvísa*, *Hesta heiti*, and *Dorgrímsþula*, all quoted in Snorri's *Prose Edda*. The first of these contains a list of

¹⁶ Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, 38; H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), 39; Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1985), 169.

¹⁷ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Skáldskaparmál. Snorri Sturluson's Ars Poetica and Medieval Theories of Language* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), 80-81; Guðrún Nordal, *Tools of Literacy: The Role of Skaldic Verse in Icelandic Textual Culture of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁸ Stéfan Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, 38.

¹⁹ H. M. Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, 51, 52.

²⁰ The Appendix contains three tables categorising all *heiti* included in this chapter along with their meanings, attributed rider and potential origin.

heroes and their horses, alongside a potential narrative stanza, while the latter are simply lists of horses. Many of the names found in the other *pulur* are also found in *Kálfsvísa*, and these *heiti* may have been taken directly from *Kálfsvísa*, rather than from any other source, which presents a possible challenge when trying to identify a collective memory of heroic legend behind these poems. Faulkes and North assume a twelfth-century date for all the texts, but there appears to be no ground for such an assumption as nothing further is known of their origins or authorship, aside from the titles they are given.²¹ Very little scholarship engages with these texts, and when cited, they are often used as reference works rather than analysed as poems in their own right.

I have used Kari Ellen Gade's and Elena Gurevich's currently unpublished editions of *Kálfsvísa* and *Hesta heiti* respectively. For *Þorgrímspula*, I have used Anthony Faulkes' edition of Snorri's *Prose Edda* (1998). The decision to capitalise certain "names" is a modern editorial one made on the basis of the name's presence in other sources.

KÁLFSVÍSA

Kálfsvísa, referred to as *Alsvinnsmál* in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, is a difficult poem for editors and translators to deal with; in all manuscripts the text is simply recorded as a single block; therefore stanza divisions are at the discretion of the editor. Gade splits it into four stanzas of eight, four, six, and eight lines; I follow her divisions. Although mostly a catalogue poem, there is a suggestion of a wider narrative function in Gade's third stanza, which describes the battle between the kings,

²¹ Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 210; Richard North, *The Origins of Beowulf: from Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 59.

Áli, and Aðils, on the ice of Lake Väner in Sweden.²² Although the date is impossible to know, it can be assumed the poem reflects older heroic traditions.²³

Dagr reið Dröslí,
en Dvalinn Móðni,
Höð Hjálmpér,
en Haki Fáki.
reið bani Belja
Blóðughófa,
en Skævaði
skati Haddingja.

Dagr reið Dröslí, en Dvalinn Móðni, Hjálmpér Höð, en Haki Fáki. Bani Belja reið Blóðughófa, en skati Haddingja Skævaði.

Dagr rode Drösull and Dvalinn Móðnir, Hjálmpér Höðr and Haki Fákr. The slayer of Beli <giant> [= Freyr] rode Blóðughófi and the champion of the Haddingjar <legendary family> [= Helgi] Skævaðr.²⁴

Stanza 1, as presented above, is apparently a straightforward list of who rode whom in the heroic corpus. A few of these heroes, such as Dagr, Haki, and Helgi are known from Snorri's *Prose Edda* or Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*;²⁵ and Hjálmpér is mentioned in the genealogies of Norse kings in the fourteenth-century manuscript *Flateyjarbok* as one of the ancestors of Haraldr *hárfagri*.²⁶ However, Dvalinn is difficult to place, as his only appearance in the eddic poetry is as a dwarf in *Völuspá*.²⁷ Of the horses mentioned in this stanza, Drösull²⁸ is a poetic term for horse,

²² Marijane Osborn and Stephen A. Mitchell, "The Battle on the Ice," *ANQ* 20, no. 3 (2007): 70.

²³ North, *The Origins of Beowulf*, 59.

²⁴ Text and translation taken from Kari Ellen Gade, ed., "Kalfsvisa," in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages III eds. Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

²⁵ Dagr is found in Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 103; Oliver Elton, trans., *First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus* (London: D. Nutt, 1894), 193, 197, 311. Haki is listed as a sea-king in Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 109. This Helgi is found in Elton, trans., *Saxo Grammaticus*, 87-89, and in a prose extract at the end of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* in Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda* (Reykjavík: Kostnaðarmaður Sigurður Kristjánsson, 1926), 269; also in: Vilhjálmur Bjarnar, Finnbogi Guðmunðsson, and Sigurður Nordal, eds., *Flateyjarbok I*. (Akranes: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-45), 25.

²⁶ Vilhjálmur Bjarnar et al, eds., *Flateyjarbok I*, 26.

²⁷ Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 4.

Höðr is related to ‘battle’,²⁹ as is *Blóðughófi* (bloody-hoof), and *Skævaðr* is probably related to the verb: *skæva* (walk, hurry),³⁰ while *Fákr* potentially means ‘swift’.³¹ Freyr is one of the Vanir.³² The references to Freyr and Helgi in lines 5-8, which specifically highlight their heroic acts, reinforce the impression that this poem is dealing with extraordinary figures. As the horses are placed alongside these heroic acts, this suggests the poem also describes extraordinary horses. Freyr’s appearance in *Kálfsvísa* appears to be more heroic than mythological. Freyr’s horse in this poem is unattested in mythological sources, and the giant-slaying used to indicate Freyr’s presence could conceivably be considered a heroic act. I would suggest this horse belongs to an established heroic tradition, perhaps of a separate hero called Freyr, or a heroic aspect of the Vanr, divorced from the mythological. The same reasoning may be applied to Dvalinn’s appearance in *Kálfsvísa*. Although Dvalinn is unattested as a heroic person in any other source, he is here listed alongside a horse with a “battle” meaning, which also appears in *Hesta heiti*, and can therefore be assumed, within the established heroic context of *Kálfsvísa*, to be correctly present as a heroic figure.

The next two stanzas expand this heroic catalogue into a potential narrative sequence, portraying the story of two legendary kings. The lack of a verb in the first line of this second stanza implies a connection with stanza 3, which supplies the

²⁸ Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 103.

²⁹ Lois Bragg, *Oedipus borealis: the aberrant body in Old Icelandic myth and saga* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 117.

³⁰ Elena Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*,” in *Poetry from Treatises on Poetics*, Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages III eds. Kari Ellen Gade and Edith Marold (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 24.

verbal phrase *til íss riðu* (rode to the ice) in its second line.³³ If we take these two stanzas together, they reference six horses and heroes, the same number referred to in the first stanza.

Vésteinn Vali,
en Vífill Stúfi,
Meinþjófr Mói,
en Morginn Vakri.

Vésteinn [rode] Valr and Vífill Stúfr, Meinþjófr Mór and Morginn Vakr.³⁴

Áli Hrafni,
- til íss riðu -
en annarr austr
und Aðilsi
grár hvarfaði,
geiri undaðr.

Áli [rode] Hrafni, - they rode to the ice -, and another one, a grey one wounded by a spear, staggered to the east under Aðils

Of the six horses referenced in these stanzas, *Valr* (falcon) and *Hrafni* (raven) are both types of bird and may indicate swiftness, while *Vakr* (alert, wakeful, nimble) indicates alertness.³⁵ The name *Stúfr* (stump) may indicate a shortened tail and imply a groomed appearance as a result of human interaction.³⁶ The literal meaning of *Mór* is ‘moor’ or ‘grassland’, but Gade offers *mó-* (brown) as a suitable translation, placing it in the category of names related to colour.³⁷ These names are listed in Table 2 of the Appendix, along with their full meanings, riders and probable origin.

The heroes mentioned in stanza 2 are mostly unidentified figures, although Gade suggests that Vésteinn may be identified with Wēohstān, father of Wīglāf in

³³ Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 211.

³⁴ The verb here, and in the first line of the translation of stanza three is supplied by Gade and not reflected in the original text.

³⁵ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 676, 281, 674. *Vakr* is also listed as a type of hawk; the modern usage refers to an adjective describing a horse which moves its legs on each side together: this trait is highly valued in Iceland.

³⁶ Gade, ed., “*Kalfsvisa*”.

³⁷ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 435. Gade, ed., “*Kalfsvisa*”.

Beowulf, and that Vífill may refer to a sea king mentioned in *Ættartölur*.³⁸ Stanza 3, however, refers to figures that do appear more clearly in extant sources. These two warring figures, here listed as Áli and Aðils, are referred to as Alo and Adillus in *Skjöldunga saga*³⁹ and as Eadgils and Onela in *Beowulf*.⁴⁰ This extract of apparent narrative in the poem, framed as it is by two explicitly catalogue stanzas, offers an interesting insight into the Scandinavian heroic tradition in which the actions and fates of the battling figures are described in close relation to those of their horses. The central heroic episode is framed by other horse-hero pairs, as if offering a familiar heroic context for the narrative.

Although a late source, the final 15 stanzas of *Bjarkarímur VIII*, a poem dated to the late fifteenth century, contains another description of this episode.⁴¹ Stanza 25 describes how: *Hestrinn beztur Hrafn er kendr; / hafa þeir tekið af Ála*, (the best horse was known as Hrafn / that they had taken from Áli).⁴² Snorri also gives an account of this battle in his *Prose Edda*, although mainly dealing with Hrólfr Kraki's involvement. However, despite his focus on Hrólfr Kraki, rather than Áli and Aðils themselves, Snorri includes the exchange of Hrafn.

There is another story told of King Hrolf that illustrates his valour, that there was a king ruling over Uppsala called Adils. He was married to Hrolf Kraki's mother Yrsa. He was at war with a king called Ali who was ruling Norway. They fixed a battle between themselves on the ice of the lake called Væni. [...] In this battle King Ali and a great part of his army fell. Then King Adils took from him as he lay dead the helmet Hildisvin and his horse,

³⁸ Gade, ed., “*Kalfsvisa*”. Vilhjálmur Bjarnar et al, eds., *Flateyjarbók 1*, 25.

³⁹ Clarence H. Miller, “Fragments of Danish History,” *ANQ* 20.3 (2007): 18-19.

⁴⁰ Seamus Heaney, ed., *Beowulf: Bilingual Edition* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 162.

⁴¹ Osborn and Mitchell, “The Battle on the Ice,” 71.

⁴² Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Hrólfs saga Kraka og Bjarkarímur* (Kjøbenhavn: S.L. Møller bogtr, 1904), 163. My translation, indebted to Osborn and Mitchell, “The Battle on the Ice,” 72.

Hrafn.⁴³

Here the taking of Hrafn is the result of the battle, along with the helmet Hildisvin. After Aðils has taken Hrafn, Snorri emphasises Aðils' status as a fierce rider – an attribute reflected in the name and nature of his horse, *Slungnir* (flinger, flyer)⁴⁴:

King Adils ordered them to ride on and rode himself at a furious rate. His horse's name was Slungnir, it was faster than any other horse.⁴⁵

This episode is also described in chapter 29 of *Ynglinga saga*,⁴⁶ where Aðils' love of excellent horses is more strongly emphasised, and Slungnir (Sløngvir) and Hrafn are picked out as the best horses of the time. This is the only version of events where Hrafn's progeny is mentioned, acting as a gift between Aðils and Goðgestr. Goðgestr, however, is emphatically not a good enough rider/hero to manage this horse, and his presumption in attempting to ride it leads to his death.

King Aðils was very fond of fine horses. He owned the best horses at that time. He had a horse called Sløngvir, and another called Hrafn. He took that one from Áli when he was dead, and from it was bred another horse that was called Hrafn. He sent it to Hálogaland to King Goðgestr. King Goðgestr rode it but was not able to curb it until he fell off its back and was killed.⁴⁷

Clearly horses played a role worth recording in this corpus of legendary heroes. Although Snorri's particular reference to Hrafn, and Aðils' horse, Slungnir, may simply be a reflection of the presence of *Kálfsvísa* among his sources, it is interesting that this part of the legend continued to be so prevalent from its appearance in

⁴³ Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 110-111. Translation taken from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes (London: Everyman, 1987), 110-111.

⁴⁴ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 569.

⁴⁵ Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 112.

⁴⁶ Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, ed., *Heimskringla*, Vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), 56-59.

⁴⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Volume I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), 32.

Kálfsvísa to its appearances in later medieval sources. Hrafn appears to be a key player in this legendary battle; when the reason for the battle is not specified, what is specified is the taking of the horse from Áli as a result.

While Gade separates stanzas 2 and 3 into two stanzas, it is not difficult to suppose that the horses and heroes mentioned in stanza 2 could be included in the narrative. In this view, the first and last stanzas, as a catalogue of other legendary persons and their steeds, perhaps act as an introduction and a conclusion to a legendary battle in which horses played an important role.

As mentioned above, stanza 4 returns to the catalogue function of the first stanza, this time referencing eight horses and eight heroes.

Björn reið Blakki,
en Bíarr Kerti,
Atli Glaumi,
en Aðils Slungni,
Högni Hölkvi,
en Haraldr Fölkvi,
Gunnarr Gota,
en Grana Sigurðr.

Björn rode Blakkr, and Bíarr Körtr, Atli Glaumr, and Aðils Slungnir, Högni Hölkvir, and Haraldr Fölkvir, Gunnarr Goti, and Sigurðr Grani.

The first two lines in this stanza reference *Björn* and *Bíarr*, and their horses *Blakkr* (dun-coloured, dusky, black)⁴⁸ and *Körtr* (unripe berry, or fruit).⁴⁹ Of these, the horse names both refer to colour and *Björn* is a fairly common name in legendary cycles, so it is difficult to identify a specific hero. *Bíarr* may refer to a son of Skjöldr, as Snorri's prologue to *Gylfaginning* mentions: *Biaf, er vér köllum Bjár* (Biaf, whom we call

⁴⁸ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 67; Kirsten Wolf, "The Color Grey in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature," *Journal of English and German Philology* 108, no. 2 (2009): 227.

⁴⁹ Gade, ed., "Kálfsvísa".

Bjárr); this name appears as Beow in Old English tradition.⁵⁰ Line 4 refers to the Aðils of the aforementioned battle, and Haraldr, the rider of Fölkvir, is suggested by Faulkes as Haraldr *hilditönn* (war-tooth), a legendary Danish king.⁵¹ The name of Aðils' horse is an agent noun from the verb *slyngva* (hurl, fling), perhaps referring to speed, while the meaning of Fölkvir is more difficult to discern.⁵²

Lines 3, 5, 7 and 8 of this stanza refer to the well-attested main characters of the Sigurðr-cycle. Atli's horse *Glaumr* (merry noise)⁵³ suggests elaborate horse-riding equipment with bells, and Grani is potentially derived from *grön* (upper lip, whiskers),⁵⁴ perhaps referring to the trimmed nature of Grani's mane. These two names indicate a close relationship with human domestication and purpose. Gurevich also translates Goti as "Gothic horse," referring directly to human horse-breeding practice and horse ownership.⁵⁵ Högni's horse, Hölkvir, is translated by Gurevich as "horse with an even pace," placing it in the category of those names associated with speed and motion.⁵⁶ In the A manuscript of the *Prose Edda*, this last stanza has an extra two lines: *Ullr ýmissum / en Óðinn Sleipni* (Ullr another / and Óðinn Sleipnir), but this is perhaps a later addition by a scribe confused as to why such a poem did not include Sleipnir, the most famous of Norse horses.⁵⁷ This line belongs completely to

⁵⁰ Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 5.

⁵¹ Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál II* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 472.

⁵² Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 569.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 218, 219.

⁵⁵ Gade, ed., "Kalfsvisa".

⁵⁶ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 309. Here *hólkvir* is cited as a poetical term for horse after a horse from the *Poetic Edda*.

⁵⁷ Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 211. My translation. Ullr is also listed as one of the Æsir in Faulkes, ed., *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 26.

the mythological sphere, and therefore does not fit with the heroic nature of *Kálfsvísa*.

HESTA HEITI

The so-called *Hesta heiti* (names of horses) is an anonymous *pula* found in manuscripts A and B (and 744x) of Snorri's *Prose Edda*.⁵⁸ Snorri uses the term *heiti* to refer to the body of poetic synonyms used in skaldic poetry, and does not appear to distinguish between proper and common nouns.⁵⁹ As these stanzas are solely lists, I shall quote them altogether, and then analyse the names given. As previously mentioned, the capitalisation of selected names, and the translation of others as common nouns, are all modern editorial decisions. Full translations of all names, where possible, are listed in the Appendix.

Glaðr, Glær, Gyllir,
Gullinfaxi,
glitnir, Gulltoppr,
Gísl, Skeiðbrimir,
Silfrtoppr, Sinir,
Sleipnir, Skævaðr,
Goti, Skinfaxi,
Grani, Stúfr ok skær

Glaðr, Glær, Gyllir, Gullinfaxi, shining one, Gulltoppr, Gísl, Skeiðbrimir, Silfrtoppr, Sinir, Sleipnir, Skævaðr, Goti, Skinfaxi, Grani, Stúfr and sprinter.

Fákr, Léttfeti,
Fjörsvartnir, Valr,
fengr, Falhófnir,
fetmóðr ok Lungr,
Vakr, vígglitnir,
vindr, Tjaldari,
veðr, víðir, vigg
ok vegdraupnir.

Fákr, Léttfeti, Fjörsvartnir, Valr, booty, Falhófnir, pace-tired and Lungr, Vakr, war-glittering, wind, Tjaldari, gust, wide one, steed and way-dripping.

Vegbjartr, Hölkvir,
Vingskornir, Hrafn,

⁵⁸ Gurevich, ed., "*Hesta heiti*".

⁵⁹ Faulkes, ed., *Skáldskaparmál*, xxxii.

Alsviðr, álvarr,
Árvakr, Drasill,
Blakkr, bölpvari,
bráinn, hástigi,
marr, jór, bautuðr,
Mór, jörmuni.

Way-bright, Hölkvir, Vingskornir, Hrafn, Alsviðr, all-cautious, Árvakr, Drasill, Blakkr, evil-borer, flickering-one, high-stepper, charger, stallion, striker, Mór, mighty-one.

Móinn, hestr, fjötri,
Móðnir, róni,
alsvartr, apli,
askr, málfeti,
Blóðhófr, Hamskarpr,
brúnn, Hófvarpnir,
viggr, Skinfaxi,
virfill, Hrímfaxi.

Brown, horse, fettered, Móðnir, gelding, all-black, foal, ash, gravel-pacer, Blóðhófr, Hamskarpr, black, Hófvarpnir, steed, Skinfaxi, virfill,⁶⁰ Hrímfaxi.⁶¹

Many of these *heiti* are found also in *Kálfsvísa* and *Þorgrímsþula*, while some can be found in mythological eddic poems. Although these *heiti* may not seem to tell us much about the heroic tradition, several of the names do suggest an interesting relationship between the horse and its function as a companion for a warrior. The names in the stanzas are arranged alliteratively, but general themes can be detected. Six of the names listed here refer to colour; of these, only *Mór* and *Móinn* are potentially ambiguous. As mentioned above, the element *mó-* could indicate a brown colour, or *mór* (moor). Gurevich suggests *Móinn* is not a *heiti* for horse at all, but one for serpent that has dropped into the list at some stage in its transmission.⁶² As *Móinn* only appears in *Hesta heiti*, perhaps this interpretation is correct; *Mór*, however appears in all three of the poems discussed here, and so the accidental transmission must be long-lived if it is a serpent *heiti*.

⁶⁰ Virfill (flexible) is also the name of a sea king.

⁶¹ Text and translation taken from Gurevich, ed., "*Hesta heiti*".

⁶² Ibid.

The largest group of *heiti* referred to here is that of those names related to motion. Of these, two refer to elemental phenomena: *vindr* (wind) and *veðr* (weather/wind),⁶³ and two are types of bird: *hrafñ* and *valr*. Two more hint at a relationship with terrain: *malfeti* (gravel-pacer) and *Vingskornir* (land-ploughing one).⁶⁴ There are, however, *heiti* with possible negative connotations, implying rash or tiring movement, for example *Fetmóðr* (pace-tired), which contrast with two *heiti* that suggest cautious or correct motion: *alvarr* (all-cautious) and *Hölkvir*.⁶⁵

Many of these names imply a sense of glittering, shining, or gold; of these, three have mythological origins as horses associated with the sun, and two can be linked with battle. Line 2.3 has *fengr* (booty)⁶⁶ and line 2.5 mentions *Vígglitnir* (war-glittering/shining).⁶⁷ These two names can be linked to gold, but also have an implied relationship with the act and results of battle – the primary purpose of the warrior-rider. There is also *gísl*, which has an ambiguous meaning: it looks like the common noun for ‘hostage’, but has been etymologically linked with a word for “beam” or “ray,” suggesting colour or sun-horse associations.⁶⁸ Among the *heiti* in this subcategory, there are also two linked with brightness and motion or travel. Line 3.1 refers to *vegbjartr* (way-bright), and the prefix *veg-* is also used in line 2.8, in *vegdraupnir* (way-dripping).⁶⁹ While this last name conjures up the sense of motion of some of the other *heiti*, it also supports this association of horses with gold: in Old

⁶³ Cleasby, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 708, 687.

⁶⁴ Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*”.

⁶⁵ All translations taken from Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*”.

⁶⁶ Cleasby, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 151.

⁶⁷ Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*”.

⁶⁸ John Lindow, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.

⁶⁹ Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*”.

Norse mythology, Draupnir is the name of Óðinn's magical ring that drips gold copies of itself.⁷⁰

However, there are several names more difficult to place. *Víðir* is such a *heiti*; translated by Gurevich as “one who travels widely,” the dictionary definition of *víðir* is “willow-tree.”⁷¹ *Bölpvari* (evil-borer), *ffjötri* (fettered), and *ffjörsvartnir* (life-darkener) all seem to have distinctly negative connotations, although *Bölpvari* and *ffjörsvartnir* could be linked to battle and therefore the purpose of the warrior.⁷² *Askr* (ash) is perhaps the most interesting, as *askr* can refer to an ash tree, an ash-spear, or a small ship.⁷³ These secondary meanings, however, obviously derive from the ash-wood nature of their composition. The best-known horse-tree link in Old Norse tradition is *Yggdrasill* (Óðinn's steed), the tree that is central to Old Norse cosmology.⁷⁴

ÞORGRÍMSPULA

Only found in manuscripts of Snorri's *Edda*, this catalogue poem contains only two horse names which are not found in the two poems already discussed: *Sóti* (soot), which belongs in the colour subcategory of name meanings, and *Gils*, which is more ambiguous. *Gils* literally translates as ‘ravine’, although it is a common component of Old Norse names, and may have alternate meanings.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Faulkes, ed., *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 47; and Faulkes, ed., *Skáldskaparmál*, 42.

⁷¹ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 714.

⁷² Gurevich, ed., “*Hesta heiti*”.

⁷³ Cleasby, and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 25.

⁷⁴ Faulkes, ed., *Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 17, 18, 19, 50, 51.

⁷⁵ These verses are taken from: Faulkes, ed., *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, 88-89. Translations are my own. Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 199.

Hrafn ok Sleipnir,
hestar ágætir
Valr ok Léttfeti
var þar Tjaldari,
Gulltoppr ok Goti,
getit heyrðak Sóta,
Mór ok Lungr með Mari.

Hrafn and Sleipnir, the famous horses Valr and Léttfeti, Tjaldari was there,
Gulltoppr and Goti, I heard Sóti spoken of, Mór and Lungr with Mar.

Vigg ok Stúfr
var með Skævaði,
þegn knátti Blakkr bera,
Silfrtoppr ok Sinir,
svá heyrðak Fáks of getit,
Gullfaxi ok Jór með goðum.

Vigg and Stúfr was with Skævaðr, Blakkr could carry athane, Silfrtoppr and Sinir,
also I heard Fákr mentioned; Gullfaxi and Jór with gods.

Blóðughófi hét hestr
ok bera kváðu
öflgan Atriða.
Gils ok Falhófnir,
Glær ok Skeiðbrimir;
þar var ok Gyllis of getit.

A horse is called Bloody-hoof and it is said he carries powerful Atriði. Gils and
Falhófnir, Glær and Skeiðbrimir; there was also Gylli mentioned.

Unlike the *Hesta heiti* verses, this poem has text other than simply names. Lines 1.2, 2.3 and 3.6 offer qualification on the status of the horse, while lines 1.6, 2.5 and 3.6 seem to imply the poet is perhaps listening to a poem like *Kálfsvísa* or *Hesta heiti* and offering commentary on the horse names. Lines 3.1-3 refer to *Blóðughófi*, which I have equated with the *Blóðughófr* of *Kálfsvísa* and the *Blóðhófi* of the *Hesta heiti*. In *Kálfsvísa*, *Blóðughófr* is ridden by Freyr; here the poet refers to another figure. However, *atriði* could be used as a common noun meaning 'rider', related to the verb *at ríða* (to ride); with this reading, Freyr could easily have been indicated.

CONCLUSION

Horses clearly played a formative role in the life and legend of a heroic warrior

in the cultural memory of the Icelanders.⁷⁶ These poems provide evidence, though fragmentary, for a heroic legendary corpus of which horses were a significant part. That the potentially framed narrative at the centre of *Kálfsvísa* is present alongside stanzas cataloguing pairs of horses and heroes indicates the importance horses were understood to have in relation to the actions of the heroes in this tradition. The predominance of horses in variant versions of the Áli-Hrafn-Aðils narrative indicates that the strength of association between the three figures was strong enough to survive transmission from oral legend into poetry, and later into prose. Whether or not King Aðils actually cared about good horses can never be known, but it is interesting that his acquisition of Hrafn from Áli is an association that may have transformed into a later association with the collecting, breeding and giving of good horses.

The second aim for this chapter was to discover whether the horse names themselves could comment on the status of the horse-hero relationship in the Old Norse heroic tradition. However, there is a difficulty in attempting to distinguish between individualised names, such as Grani and Hrafn and words that are used simply to indicate a horse, for example *blakkr*, which can either indicate a dark-coloured horse, or a particular horse, as in *Kálfsvísa*. The decision to capitalise certain “names” in these editions has been made by the modern editors, often on the basis of whether a word is verified elsewhere in the literature as a name. However, if a *heiti* only appears recorded in these poems, there is still nothing to say that it was not considered an individualised name at some point, but perhaps as the horse of a lesser-known hero whose narratives have not survived. The inclusion of Grani, Hrafn and other names from *Kálfsvísa* in *Hesta heiti* suggests that these other *heiti*, non-capitalised as they are by Gurevich, could have been considered as names operating in

⁷⁶ North, *The Origins of Beowulf*, 59.

the same way as the known, proper names. Likewise the composer of *Þorgrímspula* is clearly familiar with these horses as individual figures in a narrative or list context. In light of this, it is perhaps correct to consider all the *heiti* listed in the above poems as having equal claim to name-status.

Tables 1-3 in the Appendix tabulate the meanings and attributed rider (if applicable) of these names according to their probable mythological or heroic origins, or their status as otherwise unknown names. *Þorgrímspula* is a mix of heroic and mythological *heiti*, with six unknown *heiti*. *Kálfsvísa* consists of solely heroic horses paired with heroic riders, and *Hesta heiti* is a comprehensive list including all but one of the mythological *heiti*, all but one of the unknown names, and the majority of the heroic names as shown in Tables 1-3.

Five of the heroic horse names are present only in *Kálfsvísa*, but of these, two are attested names from extant literature (Glaumr and Slungnir, 2.5, 2.15) and the pairing of the others with a heroic figure within the context of *Kálfsvísa*, and their meanings, which contribute to the colour, battle and terrain categories, suggest a heroic origin (2.4, 2.8, 2.11).⁷⁷ Obviously there are difficulties with pushing these names into categories. I have made associations between *heiti* that are by no means definitive. For example, *Hamskarpr* (skin-sharp) I have designated a “battle” meaning (1.12), but its only attested context is as a mythological stallion that fathered Hófvarpnir (1.13). Despite the motion and battle imagery conveyed in the names of father and son, their presence in mythological narratives suggests that conclusions based on simplistic categories must be drawn with caution. Battle names do not appear to be common in either category of known names, instead appearing slightly more frequently in the group of unknown names, which may suggest words conveying

⁷⁷ These numbers refer to the table and line numbers of these name entries in the Appendix.

battle imagery were popular to describe horses, associated as they are with the status and function of the warrior, but not necessarily used as proper names (1.12, 2.2, 2.8, 2.12, 3.10, 3.13, 3.17, and 3.31).

Of the names I have associated with human interaction (2.5-7, 2.16), all four belong firmly in the heroic category, while the names containing gold or brightness elements are predominantly of mythological origin, with three of the names given by Snorri as sun-horses (1.1-2, 1.19). The names that describe the colour of the horse are unsurprisingly rare in the mythological sources, and more common in the heroic and unknown categories (1.3, 2.1, 2.11, 2.13, 3.1, 3.8, 3.21, and 3.24); mythological horses usually exhibit symbolic names, while non-mythological horses might easily be “realistically” named for their colour. This practice is commonly evident in other heroic traditions.⁷⁸

Heiti reflecting concepts of motion, whether positively or negatively, are predominantly evident in eleven unknown names (3.2, 3.11, 3.14, 3.18-19, 3.23, 3.25-28, 3.32), as opposed to the two found in the mythological names (1.13, 1.15), and eight from the heroic (2.3, 2.9-10, 2.14-15, 2.17-19). In examining the relationships of heroic horse-hero partnerships, however, these unknown names are just as useful for my analysis as those individualised names paired with heroes. It does not matter whether we can prove these names were used for proper names, they are nouns associated with horses and therefore provide an insight into the relationship between the heroic idea of a horse, and the hero, through the expression of the poet. From this we can examine how the horse was viewed in the poetic tradition, and how this was related to its state as a ridden animal, and companion to the hero.

The majority of the unknown names follow heroic trends, and may therefore

⁷⁸ Nora K. Chadwick and Victor Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 73, 74; Başgög, “Proverb Image,” 138.

be associated with the heroic tradition. The exceptions to this rule are possibly the six unknown names containing gold or brightness elements (3.7, 3.10, 3.13, 3.27-28, 3.31). It is perhaps significant that there is such a high proportion of unknown names in this category, when there are no known heroic examples, although three of these *heiti* combine the motifs of glittering or shining with battle (3.10, 3.13, 3.31). The unknown name *askr* may also be of mythological origin (3.4), given that the tree-horse association is evident in Norse cosmology. Other *heiti* that have associations with types of tree are *Grani* (2.7), which could be developed from *grön* meaning 'pine tree', and *viðir* (3.29).

Hoek-Springer, in her evaluation of these *pulur*, acknowledges the unique nature of these lists. She points out that few similar lists of heroic accoutrements exist elsewhere in the literature, which seems unusual, given the often named nature of ships or swords in the *fornaldarsögur*, and the importance of such to the warrior-hero. It may be that such *pulur* once existed but have not survived; however, Hoek-Springer prefers to think that the horse's nature as an animate object ensured a privileged space in this heroic-lore as the partner of the hero.⁷⁹ As can be seen from the above analysis, words used as indicators for horses fall into three main categories, predominantly related to motion, both positive and negative, gold or brightness, and an active acknowledgement of a working relationship with a human rider, especially relating to battle and grooming. Those names associated with sun-horses or trees can be said to have a mythological function, but the rest, especially those cited in *Kálfsvísa*, are suggestive of a basis in oral heroic tradition. Names reflecting motion and battle support the importance of the horse as the means of travel for the warrior, while the heroic names indicating interaction with a human rider present the image of a

⁷⁹ Hoek-Springer, "Horses in the Viking Imagination," 43.

companion. Glaumr, Goti and Grani (if developed from *grön* meaning 'whiskers'), are three of these names, which are also three of the most famous horse names (2.5-7). These names refer to the appearance of the horse, suggesting that the appearance of a horse mattered as much as its performance, and perhaps reflected on the status of the rider.

There is a potential challenge of using *Kálfsvísa* to recreate a body of heroic lore, as many of these horse names mentioned alliterate with their attributed riders, therefore potentially suggesting a constructed structural reason for which name goes with which hero, rather than a legendary reason.⁸⁰ The alliterative nature of the horse-rider names in *Kálfsvísa* however, does not necessarily indicate a literary foundation for the information contained within, as alliterative lists were no doubt easier for oral poets to remember, and therefore may reflect original heroic tradition. The Old English *Widsiþ* is heavily alliterated, and the *Widsiþ* poet appears to operate under the belief that such works were designed to teach.⁸¹ It would be interesting to investigate whether or not Scandinavian naming practices, which up until the ninth century favoured alliteration between family names, could have been extended to riders and their horses.⁸² As Jennbert has highlighted in her archaeological study of animals in the Viking Age, horses were so strongly integrated into symbolism and ritual practices that in certain contexts the boundaries between people and animals were not always distinct; these names may reflect such a situation, combining the materiality of the object signified by the literal meaning with the symbolism of these warrior ideals.⁸³

⁸⁰ Hoek-Springer, "Horses in the Viking Imagination," 43.

⁸¹ Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, 190.

⁸² Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, 59 (footnote).

⁸³ Jennbert, *Animals and Humans*, 225.

CHAPTER 2

Burdening Grani: the horse and his hero in eddic heroic poetry

The heroic poetry of the *Poetic Edda* provides a landscape of mountains and *myrkviðr* (mirkwood) through which heroes ride to adventure and battle. In this world of honour and death (with brief moments of love in between), the hero's horse is both a partner to the hero and symbol of heroic status. The main source of the *Poetic Edda* is the Codex Regius manuscript, which contains 29 of the lays found in modern editions.⁸⁴ Although the date of the manuscript involved is fairly late (c.1270),⁸⁵ the texts contained within are considered as written versions of oral traditions, some of which potentially date from the early Viking Age.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Eddica minora: A lesser *Poetic Edda*," in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: essays on Old Norse heroic legend*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2012), 183. The CR manuscript shelf mark is GKS 2365 4to.

⁸⁵ Robert Kellogg, "Literacy and Orality in the *Poetic Edda*," in *Vox Intexta: Orality and Textuality in the Middle Ages*, eds. Alger Nicolaus Doane and Carol Braun Pasternack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 91. Jan de Vries, *Heroic Song and Heroic Legend*, trans. B. J. Timmer (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 48.

⁸⁶ R. G. Finch, "Atlakviða," in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York: Garland, 1993), 23; Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, "Quid Sigvardus cum Christo? Moral Interpretations of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani in Old Norse Literature," *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 2 (2006): 167. *Atlakviða* composed c.900.

There are three different words for horses quoted in this chapter. The most common of these is *marr*, followed by *hestr*. The word *jór* is also used, but only three times, and exclusively to refer to Grani; of these, all are masculine nouns, but *marr* is the word most often used in eddic poetry, and *hestr* the second most common, while *jór* is the noun most often used in skaldic ship kennings.⁸⁷

N. K. Chadwick and Viktor Zhirmunsky, in their examination of Central Asian poetic traditions, categorise heroic tales as poetic biographies of the hero in which successive stages are portrayed, and the naming of the hero is almost always accompanied by the acquisition of a horse.⁸⁸ While there is an obvious danger in comparing the Scandinavian tradition with that of a nomadic, horse-orientated society, it is interesting to see how other heroic traditions have developed in relation to the horse. The horses in these traditions are individualised and named, many for their colour, and many of the heroes include their horse's name as an epithet to their own.⁸⁹ In the Kachin poem of *Kara Tygan Khan and Suksagal Khan*, there is a catalogue of horses very unlike the Norse *pulur* discussed in my first chapter: here, the description of one horse takes up 53 lines of poetry.⁹⁰ Turkmen poets often composed oral panegyrics on aspects of heroic life, but the most elaborate were those praising the ideal horse, attributed to a Turkmen hero himself: *Köroğlu*.⁹¹ The heroic legends around *Köroğlu* were shaped in the eleventh century, and deeply infused with the

⁸⁷ Hoek-Springer, "Horses in the Viking Imagination," 2-5.

⁸⁸ Nora K. Chadwick and Viktor Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 119, 199, 317.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 73, 74, 85. Başgög, "Proverb Image," 138.

⁹⁰ Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics*, 84-85.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 70-185.

relationship between the horse and the hero.⁹² Kōroğlu's horse, *Kirat* (*Kir* means grey horse, also *kirat* means quality) is marked out from birth as an appropriate companion for the hero, and is saved from death by Kōroğlu's father.⁹³ The hero and the horse grow up together, and perform heroic acts.⁹⁴ The horse plays an important role, closely linked with the hero and ideas of heroic dignity and achievement.⁹⁵ In the Germanic tradition, the Old English *Battle of Maldon* (1.187-197, 237-242) presents a relationship between Byrhtnoð and his horse of such symbolic strength that the theft of this horse has catastrophic implications for the battle: the men believe it is Byrhtnoð riding away, and so break rank to follow him.⁹⁶

In this chapter, I shall demonstrate that horses play an equally vital, if more understated, role in the development and self-definition of the hero in Scandinavian heroic poetic narratives. The Sigurðr-cycle, taking up fifteen of the poems of the heroic *Edda*, contains the majority of the examples I will examine here, although outside of the Sigurðr-cycle I have included references from the three Helgi poems.

THE SIGURÐR CYCLE – GRANI AND SIGURÐR

From the analysis of *heiti* in my first chapter, it can be seen that horses were prized most for their speed, strength, appearance, and ability to provide a battle-companion for the warrior.⁹⁷ In the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, the figure of

⁹² Judith M. Wilks, "Banditry and Royalty in Three Versions of the Kōroğlu "Destan": The Persianization of Kōroğlu," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 2 (2001): 307.

⁹³ Wilks, "Banditry and Royalty," 307.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Chadwick and Zhirmunsky, *Oral Epics*, 15, 58, 60, 122; Reichl, *Singing the Past*, 35.

⁹⁶ D.G. Scragg, ed., *The Battle of Maldon* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981, 63-64).

⁹⁷ See Chapter 1, 25-26.

Grani demonstrates these characteristics. In *Guðrúnarhvöt* (19), Guðrún wishes for Sigurðr to return from the grave and take her into death with him, but for Sigurðr to return, Grani must first be bridled.

Beit þú Sigurðr
hinn blakka mar,
hest hinn hraðfæra
lát hinig rinna;⁹⁸

[You, Sigurðr, bridle the dark-coloured steed, let the quick-faring horse gallop hither.]⁹⁹

In this description of Grani, the poet uses the epithets *blakka* and *hraðfæra*, indicating both Grani's colour, and ability to move quickly. Guðrún also cannot wish for the return of Sigurðr without imagining the return of his horse, which highlights the status of Grani as an indispensable companion to the hero. In eddic tradition Sigurðr's death cannot be enacted or visualised without the presence of Grani, except in *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma*, in which Sigurðr is killed in bed. In *Guðrúnarkviða II*, which follows the tradition of the hero being killed outside, Grani is portrayed as running from the assembly in order to inform Guðrun of her husband's death. The first half of stanza 4 relates how:

Grani rann af þingi,
gnýr vas at heyra,
en þá Sigurðr
sjalfr eigi kom;¹⁰⁰

[Grani ran from the assembly, the roar was heard, and then Sigurðr himself did not come;]

These lines visualise Sigurðr's death through the separation of horse and hero; the sequence of events displayed in *Grani rann af þingi, [...] en þá Sigurðr / sjalfr eigi*

⁹⁸ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 430-431.

⁹⁹ This translation, and all following are mine unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰⁰ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 359.

kom; emphasises this unnatural separation. Grani is running while Sigurðr is stationary and no longer able to ride him. The emphasis laid on the inactive figure as *Sigurðr / sjalfr* potentially suggests that Sigurðr and Grani are so often together, that when they are separated, further qualification is needed to remind the audience of the fact.

The second half of stanza 4 describes the exertion of both Grani, and the horses of Högni and Gunnarr:

öll váru söðuldýr
sveita stokkinn,
of vanið vási,
und vegöndum.¹⁰¹

[all the saddle-animals were splattered with sweat, accustomed to labours beneath the killers.]

Grani is described as running from the assembly, while all the horses are “dripping with sweat.” A link can perhaps be made between Grani’s riding from the assembly and horse-races, which were a common occurrence at cult sites in pre-Christian northern Europe.¹⁰² The term *hestaping* (meeting for a public horse fight) is used in the later Icelandic sagas, further emphasising the link between horse sports and assemblies.¹⁰³ Hoek-Springer suggests sweating was a ritually important state for sacrificial animals (reached through racing), as her analysis of Ibn Fadlān’s account of Rus death rituals on the Volga, suggests the links between horse-sports, fertility rites and assemblies are reflected in the sweating of the horses in that account.¹⁰⁴ She describes this episode as a potential “ritual of purification,” as the sweating horses are

¹⁰¹ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 359.

¹⁰² Mary Atkin, “Viking Race-Courses? The Distribution of Skeið Place-Name Elements in Northern England,” *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 10 (1977-78): 26-39, 34. Svale Solheim, *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1956), 53.

¹⁰³ Hoek-Springer, “Horses in the Viking Imagination,” 26.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

then killed to be interred or cremated with their owner.¹⁰⁵ If these conclusions on sweating and running can be applied to this episode, it sets up an intriguing relationship between Sigurðr's death, and the ritually purified state of his horse. This section may imply Grani will be accompanying his hero in death, as he did in life, which is perhaps why Guðrún imagines the return of her hero from death in terms of Grani.

Stanza 5 from *Guðrúnarkviða II* shows Guðrún communicating with Grani:

Gekk ek grátandi
við Grana rœða,
úrughlýra
jó frá k spjalla,
hniþnaði Grani,
drap í gras höfði,
jór þat vissi,
eigendr né lifðut.¹⁰⁶

[I went weeping to converse with Grani; wet-cheeked, I asked the horse for news; Grani became sorrowful, let his head hang down into the grass, the horse knew, that his master was not living.]

Guðrún's weeping, doubly emphasised, matches Grani's own act of mourning, of which Meletinsky has found parallels in similar scenes from North Russian folk-laments, and emphasises a similarity between the two figures.¹⁰⁷ Guðrún however, explicitly does not replace Sigurðr in the horse-hero relationship, as the poet reminds the audience of Sigurðr's privileged place in Grani's presence by emphasising *eigendr né lifðut* (his master was not living). However, in *Sigurðarkviða hin meiri* (10-11), an apparently earlier example of the Sigurðr legend,¹⁰⁸ the occasion of Sigurðr's death is recounted rather differently as Högni informs Guðrún of the killing.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 359.

¹⁰⁷ Meletinsky, *The Elder Edda and early forms of the epic*, trans., Kenneth H. Ober (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 1998), 222.

¹⁰⁸ Hoek-Springer, "Horses in the Viking Imagination," 60.

Úti stóð Goðrún
Gjúkadóttir,
ok hón þat orða
alls fyrst of kvað
hvar 's nú Sigurðr,
seggja dróttinn,
es frændr mínir
fyrri ríða.¹⁰⁹

[Outside stood Guðrún, the daughter of Giuki, and these are the words that first she said: 'Where is now Sigurðr, lord of warriors, when my kinsmen are riding ahead?']

Rather than simply an observation of the displacement of Sigurðr in relation to her brothers, Guðrún's speech shows she is alerted to the death of her husband when she sees her kinsmen *fyrri ríða* (riding ahead). This phrase indicates the relationship between the hero and the act of riding: if he is no longer riding, Guðrún knows Sigurðr is no longer fulfilling his role as *seggja dróttinn* (lord of warriors), and is therefore deceased. In contrast to *Guðrúnarkviða II*, Grani plays no actively present role; his actions, like the fate of Sigurðr, are entirely related second-hand by Högni. However, such a framework does not diminish Grani's importance in the episode, as Högni must deliver news of Sigurðr and Grani simultaneously:

Einn því Högni
andsvör veitti:
sundr höfum Sigurð
sverði höggvinn,
gnapir æ grár jór
of grami dauðum.¹¹⁰

[Only Högni gave an answer: 'Asunder we have hewed the head of Sigurðr with a sword, the grey horse bows his head always over the dead prince.']

As Högni describes how he and Gunnarr killed Sigurðr, the news is immediately followed by Grani's response to the act, which is to undertake an act of mourning for his fallen hero. The horse and the hero cannot be separated.

¹⁰⁹ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 318.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 318-319.

Hoek-Springer sees this as simply an indication of *Sigurðarkviða hin meiri*'s status as the earliest version of this scene, in which the importance of Grani and riding is least developed.¹¹¹ I would disagree. The above analysis reveals that the importance of riding reflected in *Guðrúnarkviða II* is apparent in Guðrún's response to the sight of her brothers riding without Sigurðr in *Sigurðarkviða hin meiri*, and the close relationship between Grani and Sigurðr is evident in the compulsion for Högni to relate their final interaction, despite the absence of both Sigurðr and Grani from the active narrative.

Although the prose extracts in the *Poetic Edda* are of less evidentiary value than the poetry, the mutual dependency of the Sigurðr-Grani relationship is referred to in the prose placed at the end of *Fáfnismál*. This extract describes how Sigurðr loaded Grani with gold, but Grani will not – or cannot – move until Sigurðr ‘*steig á bak hánun*’ (climbed onto his back).¹¹² This episode reflects the later view of an established tradition of Grani's exclusivity to Sigurðr, and also the association of Grani with gold, which is repeated in kennings and Viking Age iconography.¹¹³ *Oddrúnargrátr* (20) refers to the treasure of Fáfnir as *hliðfarm Grana* (the burden of Grani), and it seems the act of carrying treasure is one of Grani's primary roles in the legend cycle.¹¹⁴ In *Gripisspá* (13), Sigurðr is told:

Þú munt finna
Fáfnis bæli
ok upp taka
auð hinn fagra,
golli hlœða
á Grana bógu;
ríðr til Gjúka

¹¹¹ Hoek-Springer, “Horses in the Viking Imagination,” 53, 60, 83.

¹¹² Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 305.

¹¹³ Hoek-Springer, “Horses in the Viking Imagination,” 196.

¹¹⁴ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 380.

gramr vígrisinn.¹¹⁵

[You will find Fáfnir's den and take up the beautiful treasure, load the gold onto Grani's back; ride to Giuki's, the ready-to-do-battle prince.]

Gold is here specifically associated with Grani's back, and the loading of gold is immediately followed by a command for Sigurðr to ride. *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* (40) repeats this phrase, as Brynhildr reveals:

Þeim hétumk þá
þjóðkonungi,
es með gulli sat
á Grana bógum,¹¹⁶

[I betrothed myself to him, king of the people, when he sat with gold on Grani's back,] Here, Sigurðr is the worthiest object of Brynhildr's affections *because* he is seated on Grani's back (something her husband, Gunnarr, was never able to do), and seated alongside Fáfnir's gold. As well as a literal symbol of wealth, this gold could also act as a representation of Sigurðr's heroic achievements. Grani's back is clearly an important space, given that both Fáfnir's treasure and Sigurðr occupy the space. This can be seen in the image of Sigurðr and Grani in *Helreið Brynhildar* (12). Brynhildr justifies her devotion to Sigurðr with *Reið góðr Grana / gollmiðlandi* (the good distributor of gold rode on Grani).¹¹⁷ While great men are often described as distributing wealth in the Old Norse poetic tradition, the link between the distribution of gold and the riding of Grani echoes this association of horses with gold.

In *Sigurðarkviða hin skamma* (3), Sigurðr is portrayed as riding *i sinni*¹¹⁸ (in company) with Gunnarr and Högni, an image that is then repeated in stanza 35 of the same poem:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 273.

¹¹⁶ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 343.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 355.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 332.

áðr Gjúkungar
at garði riðu,
þrír á hestum
þjóðkonungar¹¹⁹

[before the Giukungs rode into the courtyard, three kings of the people on horseback]

Here Sigurðr is identified as one of the *Gjúkungar* and we must rely only on the numeral *þrír* to tell us there is someone else here apart from Gunnarr and Högni. Although the poet has already told us these men are riding, the phrase *á hestum* reinforces the importance of their riding-state, placing the concept in equal importance to their status as *þjóðkonungar*. However, Sigurðr's control and possession of Grani is elsewhere used to distinguish him from other men; in stanza 40, this image of the *þjóðkonungar* on horseback is repeated and Sigurðr is distinguished from Gunnarr and Högni by occupying the space on Grani's back with Fáfnir's treasure, no longer indistinguishable from the *Gjúkungar*. Brynhildr states that Sigurðr is in no way like the brothers, although they think themselves to be kings: astride Grani, Sigurðr is first among the eddic heroes.

THE SIGURÐR CYCLE - HÖGNI AND GUNNARR

The association of Grani with the treasure of Fáfnir can be extended to an association of all legendary horses with gold. In *Oddrúnargrátr* (26) the horses of Högni and Gunnarr are described as *hófgollina* (golden-hoofed) as the two men ride to their death at the hands of Atli.¹²⁰ This heroic presentation of Gunnarr is at odds with the ignoble riding presented in *Sigurðarkviða hin meiri* (20). Here, Brynhildr is describing a dream to Gunnarr, in which he is riding in chains, as a result of betraying

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 341-342.

¹²⁰ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 382.

Sigurðr:

„en þú gramr riðir
glaums andvani,
fjötri fatlaðr,
í fjanda lið.“¹²¹

[and you, prince, were riding, bereft of merriment, fettered with shackles within a troop of enemies.]

Although Gunnarr is still mounted, Brynhildr here reinforces his disloyal and ignoble acts through the medium of constrained riding – a trope that is reversed in her strongly contrasting description of Sigurðr three stanzas later. In these later stanzas, Brynhildr has just described the oaths of brotherhood Gunnarr and Sigurðr made, and calls her husband an oath-breaker, compared to Sigurðr, whom she calls the best of men.

„Þá reyndi þat,
es riðit hafði
móðigr á vit
mín at biðja,
hvé herglötuðr
hafði fyrri
eiðum haldit
við hinn unga gram.“¹²²

[Then that was tested when courageous (Sigurðr) had ridden in order to ask for my hand, how the army-destroyer (Sigurðr) had previously kept his oaths to the young prince (Gunnarr).]

Here, Brynhildr is describing Sigurðr's loyal actions toward Gunnarr. Sigurðr is a *móðigr* (courageous) rider, and one who keeps his oaths – as opposed to Gunnarr, who cannot keep his oaths, and therefore cannot ride. If referring to the episode in which Sigurðr rides alone through the fire to retrieve Brynhildr, it calls to mind the exclusivity of the Sigurðr-Grani relationship. The saddling of Grani always refers to the imminent heroic acts of Sigurðr, and his status as the only figure able to ride Grani through the flames is also referred to in *Helreið Brynhildar* (11). In *Guðrúnarkviða I*

¹²¹ Ibid., 321.

¹²² Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 322.

(22) Guðrún laments that her happiness was ruined once *Sigurðr / söðlaði Grana* (Sigurðr saddled Grani) and departs to woo Brynhildr with Gunnarr.¹²³ Sigurðr's command of Grani is a vital part of his heroic status.

THE HELGI POEMS

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (39) we have a similar episode to the one described above, where instead of Guðrún desiring the return of Sigurðr-Grani, we have Sigrún wishing for her hero, Helgi, to return from the grave. She describes her happiness before Helgi's arrival, and then her misery since his death. In order for her to be happy, she requires Helgi's horse, Víglær, to carry Helgi to her:

Sitka svá sæl
at Sevafjöllum
ár né of nætr
at unak lífi,
nema und visa
Vígblær þinig.
(gollbitli vanr,
knegak grami fagna.)¹²⁴

[I sat so happily at Sefafell, neither early nor at night-time will I live contentedly, unless under the prince Víglær [comes] hither, accustomed to his golden bridle, I could greet the prince with joy.]

Like Guðrún, Sigrún cannot imagine Helgi returning without imagining his horse bringing him home. Notably, Víglær is *vanr* (tamed, or accustomed) to his *gollbitli* (gold bridle): clearly, Helgi is an excellent horseman and treats his horse in the correct manner. Víglær's bridle is emphatically made of gold, which echoes the association between horses and gold evident in the Sigurðr-cycle.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid., 355. *Gripisspa* also refers to Sigurðr's exchange of appearance with Gunnarr, but no purpose is specified. Ibid., 330.

¹²⁴ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 261-262.

¹²⁵ In *Beowulf*, l.1034-1039, Beowulf is given eight gold-bridled horses for defeating Grendel. Heaney, *Beowulf*, 69.

CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the above analysis, the horse-hero relationship in these heroic cycles is primarily represented as a way of defining heroic actions and distinguishing heroic men from their peers. Gold is used to signify the importance of a particular hero, and a level of competition between poems may be seen: as *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (39) depicts Helgi's horse as 'gold-bridled', so *Oddrúnargrátr* (26) says Högni and Gunnarr's horses possess golden-hooves. Sigurðr and Grani have a mutually dependent partnership, and these heroic lays present a world in which the horse, and riding, is used for the development and definition of the eddic hero.

However the over-arching theme of the examples analysed above is that of control, dominance, or lack of control. Gunnarr's fettered riding, and Sigrún's curse is contrasted with Helgi's perfectly trained horse and Sigurðr's possession of Grani. Grani's sprint from the assembly in *Guðrúnarkviða II* is a result of the loss of Sigurðr's controlling presence.

The theme of domination is reflected in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (44), when Sinfjötli and Guðmundr are taking part in a *flyting* (exchange of insults), in which one accuses the other of being sexually used by Grani:

Dú vast brúðr Grana
á Brávellu,
gollbitluð vast
gör til rásar,
hafðak þór móðri
mart skeið riðits
svangri und söðli,
simul, forbergis.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 228.

[You were a bride of Grani on Bravoll Plain, were gold-bridled, prepared to gallop; I have ridden you weary on many a downhill stretch of road, lean beneath my saddle, cow.]

While the primary purpose of this passage is the identification of the insulted man with a mare – a common and long-lived insult in Old Norse literature – the inclusion of the gold bridle and the repetition of adjectives indicating exhaustion: *svangr* (lean, exhausted) and *móðr* (weary) suggests this insult also alludes to the interaction between the horse and his hero discussed in this chapter.¹²⁷ It is also interesting that Grani, the greatest legendary stallion, is the figure sexually dominating the mare-figure, while the speaker dominates the mare-figure by riding him.

In the episode from *Guðrúnarkviða II* discussed above, the description of the sons of Giuki having 'exhausted' their horses has negative connotations, reinforced by the poem referring to them as '*vegöndum*' (slayers), rather than warriors.¹²⁸ Gunnarr and Högni have not controlled their horses' pace: they have exhausted them. In my first chapter, *heiti* such as *alvarr* (all-cautious), *Tjaldari* (ambler), and *fetmóðr* (pace-tired) suggest that the level of exertion allowed on horses should be a serious consideration of the rider.¹²⁹ With reference to the later prose sagas, it can perhaps be seen that it was improper to let horses run with sweat.¹³⁰

In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (5.1-4), this motif of forcing horses to excessively exert themselves is reflected in Atli's description of their failed mission.

¹²⁷ David Clark, "Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems," in *Revisiting the Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend*, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (New York: Routledge, 2013), 14-15; Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, eds., *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1992), 253, 182.

¹²⁸ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 689.

¹²⁹ See Chapter 1, 19. Similar *heiti* are also evident from *Hamðismal* (3) where the horses that trampled Svanhildr are referred to as *gangtömum* (gait-tamed), and *Atlakviða* (33), in which Atli's horse is referred to as *eyrskáan* (gravel-pacing). Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 394, 433.

¹³⁰ See Chapter 3, 47-48.

Here, Atli, son of Jarl Iðmundr, and his men have been instructed to retrieve Sigrlinn for King Hjörvarðr (Helgi's father), but are unable to obtain her:

Höfum erfíði
ok ekki ørendi;
mara þraut óra
á meginfjalli,¹³¹

[We have had trouble and not (achieved) our errand; exhausted (/failed) our horses on high mountains,]

Here exhaustion is associated with failure and humiliation, both for the horse and for the hero. Atli and his men have not been able to win the desired woman for their leader, and so they have forced their horses to labour in vain, just as the killers' horses in *Guðrúnakviða II* have been forced to exert themselves.

The wording of this stanza can support the idea of the horse as a symbol representing the reputation of the riders, for by failing the mission they have also failed their reputation. The gold associated with horses in these lays could also act as an indication of a hero's worth; the concept of Fáfnir's treasure, traditionally carried by Grani, and a symbol of Sigurðr's primary heroic achievement, may be the source of this association. Inability to ride, or to control one's horse, is often placed alongside failure or betrayal. Gunnarr is unable to control his horse in Brynhildr's dream because he has betrayed Sigurðr, and Sigrún curses Dagr's horsemanship because he has betrayed Helgi.¹³² Helgi and Sigurðr are, on the other hand, ideal horsemen who have the correct level of interaction with, and control over their horses.

¹³¹ Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 236.

¹³² Finnur Jónsson, ed., *Sæmundar-Edda*, 260. This episode is a mirror of Sigurðr's betrayal by Högni and Gunnarr.

CHAPTER 3

Identity correlation: the horse as an honour-commodity for the saga-hero

The *Íslendingasögur* of medieval Iceland (c.1200-1350 AD) narrate the stories of notable individuals, family groups, or specific districts in the period from 950-1050 AD, and are known in English as the Family Sagas.¹³³ In the second half of this thesis, I intend to explore the relationship between horses and their heroes, with the view of comparing my findings with those of my first two chapters. Critics have considered heroic poetry to have a significant influence on the development of the *Íslendingasögur*, and Guðrún Nordal has also emphasised the role skaldic verse plays in saga-culture, suggesting that the poetic tradition and saga composition go ‘hand-in-hand’.¹³⁴

¹³³ Hermann Pálsson, *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing* (Vienna: Fassbänder, 1999), 7.

¹³⁴ Guðrún Nordal, “The Art of Poetry and the Sagas of the Icelanders,” in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds., Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 219. For a review of critical opinion on the role of heroic poetry in shaping the Icelandic sagas, see: W.P. Ker, *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1896), 199, 210; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík: Heimskringla, 1998), 228-237; Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas (1180-1280)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 119; Vésteinn Ólason, “The Icelandic Saga as a Kind of Literature with Special Reference to its Representations of

Following my investigation of the poetic tradition, I intend to discover whether there is a shift in the way the horse-hero relationship is presented and used in these later prose narratives. However, to use the term “hero” with these sagas is less than straightforward, as the concept of the hero is greatly changed from the poetic tradition. The characteristics of the hero change from saga to saga, and men such as Egill and Grettir contrast strongly with diplomatic men such as Njáll, Óláfr *pái* and Snorri *goði*. *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* contains perhaps the most obvious example of this. Hrafnkell is not a hero, at least, not in the sense of the heroic discourse of the *Poetic Edda*.¹³⁵ He chooses humiliation over death, and dies in his bed after a second run of great prestige. It is interesting then that *Hrafnkels saga* appears to exhibit the strongest horse-hero relationship in the saga literature.¹³⁶ The sagas recognise more than one version of prowess, and as such there must always be multiple heroes in the sagas, of multiple talents.¹³⁷ In light of this difficulty, it will be more constructive to focus on the use of horses in the *Íslendingasögur* and then consider how these uses contributed to the characterisation and development of the hero, by which I primarily mean the protagonist of the narrative episode.

There are relatively few individualised horses in the sagas, compared to the lists I examined in my first chapter, and the horse, although a vital part of saga life, perhaps does not inhabit the same privileged space we find in earlier heroic traditions. Perhaps the function of the horse has become simply a method of transportation in

Reality,” in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, eds., Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop, and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 45.

¹³⁵ Óskar Halldórsson, “The Origin and Theme of *Hrafnkels saga*,” in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland, 1989), 271; Heather O’Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse and the Poetics of Saga Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 228.

¹³⁶ Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða: A Study*, trans., R. George Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958), 35.

¹³⁷ C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 91.

these narratives. However, Icelandic horses, though small of stature, are an impressive breed, trained to master the *tölt* and a fifth gait called in English the “flying gait,” and have remained purebred since the Viking Age.¹³⁸ Such importance historically placed on the unique qualities of the horse in Iceland suggests that even though John Lindow has suggested the eddic hero has no place in the *Íslendingasögur* and John Tucker emphasises the critical or ambivalent attitude usually taken by saga writers towards pre-Christian “heroic” motives, these sagas are a product of the atmosphere in which the Icelandic Commonwealth operated, and such an atmosphere relied heavily on horses.¹³⁹ Therefore, while perhaps not prioritised to the level of the previous heroic traditions, it is not wholly unlikely that the figure of the horse carried significant symbolic weight in the cultural memory of the Icelanders.

Many saga audiences may also have been aware of the heroic poetry discussed in the first half of this thesis, and in the episodes examined below six horses are mentioned by name: Freyfaxi, Freysfaxi, Hvítingr, Snækoll, Dött, and Heiðarauðr.¹⁴⁰ The level of description given to the horses is significant, given the general lack of description of many characters’ external appearances. Are these later horse episodes descriptions of Icelandic life or do they have some other meaning that can be discovered by considering them within their literary and traditional context?¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ The Icelandic Horse Society of Great Britain, “About the Icelandic Horse,” www.ihs.gb.co.uk/about_the_breed.htm [accessed August 28 2013]; The Icelandic Horse Society of Great Britain, “The Gaits of the Icelandic Horse,” www.ihs.gb.co.uk/the_gaits.htm [accessed August 28 2013].

¹³⁹ John Lindow, “A mythic model in *Bandamanna saga* and its significance,” in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland, 1989), 241. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, “Starkaðr, Loki and Egill Skallagrímsson,” in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker (New York: Garland, 1989), 146; Tucker, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁴⁰ This number may be different if one considers *Brúnninn/Brúnn* (Blackie) or *Bleikrinn* (Yellow-dun) to be names, as Marianne Kalinke does in her translation of *Víglundar saga*.

¹⁴¹ Theodore M. Andersson, “The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas,” *Speculum* 45 (1970): 43.

Due to the constraints of this thesis, I am unable to review every saga in the *Íslendingasögur*, instead providing a demonstrative sample of episodes from the sagas. The texts analysed in this chapter are selected from the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the *Íslendingasögur* on the basis of passages in the texts that show significant interaction between the function or presentation of the horse and the characterisation of its rider or owner. I shall focus mainly on: *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa* (1215-30), *Eyrbyggja saga* (c.1220), *Fljótsdæla saga* (1500-50), *Fóstbræðra saga* (c.1200), *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (c.1250), *Grettis saga* (1310-20), *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga* (1270-80), *Hávarðar saga Ísaffjörður* (1300-50), *Laxdæla saga* (1230-60), *Ljósvetninga saga* (1230?-50), *Brennu-Njáls saga* (1275-85), *Vápnfirðinga saga* (1225-50), *Vatnsdæla saga* (1270-80), *Víga-Glúms saga* (1220-50), and *Víglundar saga* (c.1400).¹⁴² They are listed here along with their probable dates of composition. This chapter examines selected extracts from these sagas in relation to the presentation of horse and hero, and the function of horse-fights and gift-exchange within this discourse. I begin with a brief survey of the varied vocabulary of horse-words used in the examples cited.

KEY VOCABULARY

<i>hestr</i>	horse (masc.)
<i>hross</i>	horse (neuter), mare
<i>stóðhross</i>	stud-horse (neuter)
<i>hryssa</i>	mare (fem.)
<i>merr</i>	mare (fem.)
<i>merhryssi</i>	mare (fem.)
<i>gelda</i>	gelding, from <i>gelda</i> to castrate
<i>graðan hestr</i>	an entire horse (i.e. not castrated)
<i>reiðhestr</i>	riding horse (masc.)
<i>hestklárr</i>	work-horse (masc.)
<i>klárr</i>	work-horse (masc.)
<i>vánfoli</i>	a vicious horse (masc.)

¹⁴² Vésteinn Ólason, "Family Sagas," in *A Companion to Old-Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed., Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 114-115.

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

Horses were a vital part of medieval Icelandic life. The laws as recorded in the Old Icelandic law-book, *Grágás*, suggest a close link between horse and owner, in which the appearance and behaviour of the horse is legally and symbolically that of the owner. For example, if a man injures another by setting a horse on him, he is legally responsible for any injuries the horse may inflict, as if he had attacked the man himself.¹⁴³

The actions of horses in these sagas also provide literal and symbolic suggestions about the character of the owner or rider. Such is the case in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, when Otkell is unable to control his horses, which carry him *meira en hann vildi* (faster than he wanted).¹⁴⁴ This phrase is repeated, emphasising Otkell's lack of control, which results in his spur striking Gunnarr and drawing blood. Although the incident is clearly an accident, Otkell does not apologise for his actions; he would rather start a feud than admit that he is unable to control his horses: perhaps the inability to control his horses also suggests Otkell is a poor manager of men.

The physical appearance of a horse also reflects on its owner. In *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstunga*, Gunnlaugr knocks a shepherd senseless for taking his horse and returning it covered in sweat.¹⁴⁵ Although the unauthorised use of a man's horse could be punishable by law, and from a practical point of view the shepherd's actions may

¹⁴³ Andrew Dennis, Peter Godfrey Foote and Richard Perkins, trans., *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás I* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 148.

¹⁴⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 134; Robert Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga* (London: Penguin, 2001), 90.

¹⁴⁵ Sigurður Nordal, ed., "Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu," in *Borgfirðinga sögur* Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 62; Katrina Attwood, trans., "The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue," in *Saga of Warrior Poets*, ed. Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), 119.

have made it difficult for Gunnlaugr to travel as the horse has already been worked that day, the emphasis here is laid on the horse's appearance: Gunnlaugr does not wish to be associated with an exhausted horse.

Returning a horse in such a state could, and did, start feuds in these sagas, and the initial conflict in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* revolves around such a sweating horse. The saga-author relates how:

Hrafnkell átti þann grip í eigu sinni, er honum þótti betri en annarr. Þat var hestr brúnmóalóttr at lit, er hann kallaði Freyfaxa sinn. Hann gaf Frey, vin sínum, þann hest hálfan. Á þessum hesti hafði hann svá mikla elsku, at hann strengði þess heit, at hann skyldi þeim manni at bana verða, sem honum riði án hans vilja.¹⁴⁶

Hrafnkel had one treasured possession which he held dearer than anything else he owned. It was a pale-dun stallion, with a black mane and a black stripe down the back. He called the horse Freyfaxi and gave his patron Frey a half-share in it. Hrafnkel loved this horse so passionately that he swore a solemn oath to kill anyone who rode the stallion without his permission.¹⁴⁷

Freyfaxi's colouring is unusual, which serves to emphasise the valued nature of this horse. Solheim suggests this episode echoes the sacred horses of Freyr found in pre-Christian Scandinavian cults, but the emphasis is laid on Hrafnkell's love for the horse, not on any sacred characteristic.¹⁴⁸ Hrafnkell does not forbid anyone from riding the horse, but anyone from riding it *without his permission*. Although Hrafnkell has told his shepherd *ek vil, at þú komir aldri á bak honum* (I want you never to ride this horse), Einarr does so, and is subsequently killed by Hrafnkell.¹⁴⁹ However, not only does Einarr ride Freyfaxi, but he *reið Freyfaxa alt frá eldingu ok til miðs aptans*.

¹⁴⁶ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," in *Austfirðinga sögur Íslenzk fornrit 11* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), 100.

¹⁴⁷ Hermann Pálsson, trans., "Hrafnkel's Saga," in *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1971), 38.

¹⁴⁸ Solheim, *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*, 165.

¹⁴⁹ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," 102; Hermann Pálsson, trans., "Hrafnkel's Saga," 40.

Hestrinn bar hann skjótt yfir ok víða, því at hestrinn var góðr af sér (rode Freyfaxi from dawn to mid-evening, travelling fast and far, for this was an outstanding horse).¹⁵⁰ The saga-author tells us how Freyfaxi *var vátr allr af sveita, svá at draup ór hverju hári hans, var mjök leirstokkinn ok móðr mjök ákafliga* (was all running with sweat; and every hair on his body was dripping. He was covered in mud and panting with exhaustion).¹⁵¹ This description clearly indicates Freyfaxi has been pushed to his limits.

Hrafnkell's interaction with Freyfaxi is reminiscent of Guðrún's encounter with Grani after Sigurðr's death in *Guðrúnakviða II*, and echoes Gunnarr's reaction on the death of his dog in *Njáls saga*, as there is a similarity in the use of *fóstri* that may imply literary indebtedness.¹⁵²

Síðan gekk hann út ok sér Freyfaxa ok mælti við hann: “Illa þykkir mér, at þú ert þann veg til görr, fóstri minn; en heima hafðir þú vit þitt, er þú sagðir mér til, ok skal þessa hefnt verða; far þú til liðs þíns.” En hann gekk þegar upp eptir dalnum til stóðs síns.¹⁵³

He went outside, and when he saw Freyfaxi he said to him, ‘It grieves me to see how you have been treated, my fosterling. You had your wits about you when you came to me, and this shall be avenged. Go back to your herd.’ The stallion left immediately and went up the valley to his mares.¹⁵⁴

Hrafnkell's initial reaction to the unauthorised riding is not concerned with the insult to Freyr, but instead with the insult to his horse, which he regards as a foster son. Such an insult is an insult to Hrafnkell himself, and must be avenged rather than compensated.

¹⁵⁰ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., “Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða,” 103; Hermann Pálsson, trans., “Hrafnkel’s Saga,” 41.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² See Chapter 2, 32; Cook, trans., *Njal’s Saga*, 126.

¹⁵³ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., “Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða,” 104.

¹⁵⁴ Hermann Pálsson, trans., “Hrafnkel’s Saga,” 42.

After Hrafnkell has been humiliated and exiled, his enemies take over his property, including Freyfaxi. Considering the horse to be bad luck because of the trouble it has apparently caused, the Þjóstarssons put a bag over Freyfaxi's head, fasten a stone to his neck and push him off a cliff.¹⁵⁵ Freyfaxi is considered an active figure, fatally implicated in Hrafnkell's crimes, and therefore liable to answer for them. His death is an execution, indicating their belief in the horse as an extension of Hrafnkell.

Such violent action triggered by horse abuse appears also in *Fljótsdæla saga* when a man steals some horses and then *sendir hann hrossin vestr yfir heiði, ok vóru þau til gjör allópökkuliga* (sent the horses west over the heath, and they were in a filthy state).¹⁵⁶ Ölviðar has not only appropriated Ásbjörn's property without authorisation, but also drives them over a considerable distance, and returns them in an "all-non-agreeable" state. Ásbjörn takes the matter to the Spring Assembly, has Ölviðar declared an outlaw, and then goes to his farm and kills him. Ásbjörn's honour is at stake, as the inability to control one's horse had serious implications in the society of the sagas and historical Iceland. A number of laws are focussed on the compensation required for misappropriating a man's equine property and using it in an inappropriate way, with varying levels of punishment detailed for stealing or riding a man's horse without his permission, or over too great a distance.¹⁵⁷

In *Vatnsdæla saga* we find another horse apparently dedicated to Freyr, Freysfaxi, and yet this named horse effectively acts only as a feature of its owner's character description:

¹⁵⁵ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., "Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða," 124; Hermann Pálsson, "Hrafnkel's Saga," 61.

¹⁵⁶ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., "Fljótsdæla saga," in *Austfirðinga sögur* Íslenzk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950), 217-218; Jean Young and Eleanor Haworth, trans., "The Fljotsdale Saga," in *The Fljotsdale Saga and The Droplaugarsons* (London: J.W. Dent, 1990), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Dennis et al, eds., *Grágás I*, 82-86.

Brandr átti hest föxóttan, er kallaðr var Freysfaxi; hann var virkr at hestinum, ok þótti góðr; var hann ok øruggr til alls, bæði vígs ok annars; höfðu flestir þat fyrir satt, at Brandr hefði átrúnað á Faxa.¹⁵⁸

Brand had a stallion with a coloured mane, called Freysfaxi; he was devoted to this horse and thought highly of him; he was a grand horse in every way, both for fighting and other uses. Most men felt pretty certain Brand put his faith in Faxi.¹⁵⁹

While Brandr is devoted to his horse, and Freysfaxi is described in grandiose terms, Freysfaxi is merely attached to the description of Brandr as if a necessary part of his characterisation. Although Brandr's horse is named after the god, the saga writer specifies that Brandr put his faith in Faxi, not Freyr to whom he is devoted. Brandr is also known as *Faxa-Brandr* (horse-Brandr). This suggests a strong relationship between horse and rider, but unfortunately one on which the narrative does not linger.

The appearance of a man's horse also reflected on his character. In *Laxdæla saga*, Kotkell's negative character in the saga is reflected by his *svartr* (black) stallion.¹⁶⁰ Although exhibiting the great size, handsome appearance and proven fighting skills that are established traits to look for in an ideal horse, the colour here is unusual, as *svartr* is rarely used as an indicator of the colour of horses. *Víga-Glúms saga*, chapter 16, describes how Víga-Skúta (a negative character in the saga, having separated from Víga-Glúm's daughter) disguises himself to avoid his enemies, by making his spear into a staff, turning his cloak inside out and *tekr af söðulinn ok ríðr berbakt* (taking the saddle off [his horse] and riding bareback).¹⁶¹ The state and

¹⁵⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Vatnsdæla saga*, Íslenzk fornrit 8, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1939), 90.

¹⁵⁹ Gwyn Jones, trans., *The Vatnsdalers' Saga* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 92.

¹⁶⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga* Íslenzk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), 101; Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *Laxdæla Saga* (London: Penguin, 1969), 130.

¹⁶¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., "Víga-Glúms saga," in *Eyfirðinga sögur* Íslenzk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), 54; Lee M. Hollander, trans., "Víga-Glúm's Saga," in *Víga-Glúm's saga and the story of Ögmund Dytt* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), 71.

appearance of Víga-Skúta's horse helps to create the impression of a character lower in social standing than he actually is, and also indicates his cowardice in being willing to cast off these aspects of his appearance in order to associate with his enemies undetected. These are not rare episodes, as the relationship between a man's horse and his appearance is referred to twice in *Ljósvetninga saga*. The first example of this is from *Ófeigs þáttur*, a short tale inserted into the saga, in which Ófeigr's horse is described as *mikill ok feitr ok var graðr* (big and fat and entire) and Ófeigr as a *sköruligsti* (imposing) figure when mounted.¹⁶² Such a description emphasises that the horse is a powerful masculine specimen, and not castrated, reflecting positively on Ófeigr as *sköruligsti*, which can mean “manly” as well as “imposing.”¹⁶³ Later in the saga, a man's horse is used as a comparative: the grandeur of the horse is hidden while the man is mounted, but revealed when he dismounts:

En einn var sá maðr, er þeim fannsk einna mest um, er á baki var. Þat þótti mönnum lýtit á, at þeim sýndisk hann ríða folaldi. Ok er þeir stigu af baki ok hestar váru lausir látnir, þá þótti sá hestr miklu mestr, er sjá maðr hafði ríðit, er þar var kominn.¹⁶⁴

There was one man on horseback who seemed most impressive of all, though it seemed a defect that he was riding a mere foal. But when they dismounted and the horses were let loose, the horse that the man had ridden seemed by far the largest.¹⁶⁵

In this description of Skeggi *inn rammi* (the strong), his horse is first seen as insignificant compared to the man, then revealed to be a fine specimen among the other horses, thus increasing his rider's stature further.¹⁶⁶ Likewise, in chapter 19 of

¹⁶² Björn Sigfússon, ed., *Ljósvetninga saga* Íslenzk fornrit 10 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1940), 118. My translation.

¹⁶³ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 565.

¹⁶⁴ Björn Sigfússon, ed., *Ljósvetninga saga*, 88.

¹⁶⁵ Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, “*Ljósvetninga saga*,” in *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvetninga saga and Valla-Ljóts saga* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 227.

¹⁶⁶ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 482.

Fóstbræðra saga, a man's appearance is first described by his *allvænum hesti* (all-handsome horse), and only secondarily by his weapons.¹⁶⁷ We also see this comparative function between a horse and his rider in an earlier chapter of *Fóstbræðra saga*, in which Þorgeirr's *raudan hest*, (red horse), which is *vænan ok reiðgóðan ok mikinn vexti* (large and beautiful, [and] excellent for riding), is stolen.¹⁶⁸ When Þorgeirr confronts the thief, he says: „*Þú hefir vænligan hest, eða hvern á hestinn?*“ (“You have a beautiful horse there – who owns it?”). Such a remark emphasises the apparent disparity between the *vænligan hest* and its current rider, on account of which Þorgeirr implies that Bjarni cannot be the owner. Bjarni, however, suggests this excellence bears no relation to the honour of its owner. Before he kills him, Þorgeirr suggests Bjarni return the horse to its *eigandi* (possessor), which is the same term used in *Guðrúnarkviða II* to indicate Sigurðr's relationship with Grani.¹⁶⁹

A man's bridle and saddle could act as a substitution for his horse, and in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, chapter 12, Vésteinn borrows a horse from Þorvaldr, but keeps his own *söðulreiði* (saddle-gear) and especially his jingling bridle.¹⁷⁰ Concerned with the maintenance of his honour, when using another man's horse, Vésteinn is supporting his own image by keeping his own horse-riding equipment. His jingling bridle also makes him visible and recognisable, which could be designed to show his courage and disregard of danger.

¹⁶⁷ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Fóstbræðra saga,” in *Vestfirðinga sögur Íslenskr fornrit 6* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 218; Lee M. Hollander, trans., “The Sworn Brothers,” in *The Sagas of Kormák and the Sworn Brothers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 142.

¹⁶⁸ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Fóstbræðra saga,” 154-155; Hollander, trans., “The Sworn Brothers,” 106-107.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* See Chapter 2, 32; Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 119.

¹⁷⁰ Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Gísla saga Súrssonar,” in *Vestfirðinga sögur Íslenskr fornrit 6* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 40; George Johnston, trans., *The Saga of Gisli* (London: J.M. Dent, 1963), 15-16.

HORSE-FIGHTS

Horse-fights appear to have been a prolific part of Icelandic life, offering men the chance to distinguish themselves through their fighting stallions. In the sagas, these episodes often demonstrate the similarities between a hero and his horse – and the less pleasant attributes of the hero's nemesis. In the first of the horse-fights in *Víga-Glúms saga*, Ingólfr is introduced alongside his stallion, Snækoll; Ingólfr's worth as a man is perhaps summarised in the line: *Ingólfr átti stóðhross góð* (Ingolf owned some good stud-horses).¹⁷¹ Ingólfr's rival in this episode, Kálfr, also owns a notable horse: *hann átti hestklár einn gamlan, en hann kom hverjum hesti fyrir* (he was the owner of an old work horse which, however, overcame every other stallion).¹⁷² Kálfr's horse is glorified by the people of the Þvera area, but it is nonetheless a *hestklár* (work-horse), and Glúmr considers the match to be unworthy of Ingólfr's stallion. Kálfr suggests Glúmr's reluctance to sanction the fight is because *kann vera, at sanni it fornkeðna, at fé sé dróttni glikt* (there is some truth in the old adage that 'like beast, like master.').¹⁷³ Firstly, that as Ingólfr's horse is inferior to Kálfr's in courage, so Ingólfr is inferior to Kálfr; but secondly that Glúmr, as Ingólfr's master, is also deficient in courage. This situation seems to reflect what Rohrbach calls the *metonymische Dimension der Pferdekämpfe* (metonymic dimension of the horse-fights), in which the horses are used to make implications about the men involved.¹⁷⁴ While most saga literature focuses

¹⁷¹ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., "Víga-Glúms saga," 42; Hollander, trans., *Víga-Glúm's saga*, 59.

¹⁷² Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., "Víga-Glúms saga," 43; Hollander, trans., *Víga-Glúm's saga*, 61.

¹⁷³ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., "Víga-Glúms saga," 43; Hollander, trans., *Víga-Glúm's saga*, 61.

¹⁷⁴ Lena Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick: Mensch-Tier-Relationen in der Sagaliteratur*. Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2009), 184.

on the outcome of these fights, I agree with Rohrbach that the fight mechanism itself often tells us as much about this relationship as the result.¹⁷⁵ A second horse-fight descends into a confusing struggle between men and horses, and when Ingólfr's stallion is proved better than Kálfr's work-horse in every way, Kálfr becomes increasingly violent, first directing his actions towards his own horse, then toward his enemy's, then towards his enemy himself.¹⁷⁶

These episodes are echoed in the second part of the saga, in which Vigfús Glúmsson challenges his rival, Bárðr, to a horse fight. Bárðr is unwilling to set his horse against Vigfús', because Vigfús' horse looks *vánder* (vicious).¹⁷⁷ This is perhaps how Bárðr views Vigfús, as until this moment, Vigfús and Bárðr have not come into conflict: the appearance of this *vánder* horse signals a change of relations between the two men. Bárðr then uses the horse-fight to comment on Vigfús' status as a good man, questioning his ability to arbitrate between men and to partake in masculine activities:

„Vel hefir þú einurð haldit hér til, en nú skýjar á heldr, ok finnsk nú þat á, at þú munt optar hafa staðit nær búrhillum ok ráðit um matargerð með móður þinni en gengit at hestavígum, ok er þann veg litt skegg þitt eigi síðr.“¹⁷⁸

“You, Vigfús, have been fair in your decisions so far; but now I'm not so sure. One can see now that you probably more often stood near the pantry shelves and helped your mother decide about the cooking than attended horse-fights; and the colour of your beard points that way too.”¹⁷⁹

The horse-fight is here expressly stated as the work of men, and part of the social work of young men in order to develop the correct masculine character. While an

¹⁷⁵ Solheim, *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*, 57; Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, 184.

¹⁷⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., “Víga-Glúms saga,” 44; Hollander, trans., *Víga-Glúm's saga*, 62.

¹⁷⁷ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 685; Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., “Víga-Glúms saga,” 61.

¹⁷⁸ Jónas Kristjánsson, ed., “Víga-Glúms saga,” 62.

¹⁷⁹ Hollander, trans., *Víga-Glúm's saga*, 78.

interactive relationship with an individualised horse is not emphasised, it is interesting that the horse still appears to play a role in the development and definition of young men through the medium of the horse-fight. A similar fight takes place in *Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa* and *Grettis saga*, where the horses are used as comrades in arms, and suffer the same fate as the humiliated loser.¹⁸⁰

Descriptions of the heroes involved in these horse-fighting episodes often appear to emulate the descriptions of their prize stallions, and the description of conflict between horses often mirrors the conflict between their owners. The contrasts between Björn and Þórðr at a horse-fight in *Bjarnar saga* echo the contrast often set up between the hero's horse and its challenger. Björn is tall, powerfully built, manly and handsome, which echoes the desirable traits of a stallion. In contrast, Þórðr Kolbeinsson is held in esteem by important men, just as the hero's rival often has a horse considered the best, until pitted against the hero's horse.¹⁸¹ Likewise, in *Gunnlaugs saga*, Gunnlaugr himself seems to echo the desired attributes of a prized horse: he is big and strong, very manly, and an excellent fighter.¹⁸² Perhaps horses and heroes were expected to adhere to similar standards of masculine behaviour. In *Víglundar saga*, chapter 8, two horses are introduced that echo the traits of their owners. Although *Víglundar saga* shows significant influence from continental romance and native *fornaldarsögur*, it is considered by the Íslensk fornrit editors as

¹⁸⁰ Sigurður Nordal, ed., "Bjarnar saga Hítðlakappa," in *Borgfirðinga sögur* Íslensk fornrit 3 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1938), 175; Finlay, trans., "The Saga of Bjorn," 195-196; Guðni Jónsson, ed., *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, Íslensk fornrit 7 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1936), 99, 100; Bernard Scudder, trans., *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, (London: Penguin, 2005). 69-70.

¹⁸¹ Alison Finlay, trans., "The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People," in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, ed. Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), 153.

¹⁸² Attwood, trans., "The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue," 116.

one of the *Íslendingasögur*, and therefore suitable for inclusion in this analysis.¹⁸³

Þeir bræðr áttu einn graðan hest, brúnan at lit; hann var mjök ólmr; hverjum hesti renndi hann, sem honum var við att; hann hafði vígtenn svá stórar, at þeir vǫru öngum hesttönnum líkar. Víglundr átti ok graðan hest, fífilbleikan at lit, hesta beztr ok fegrstr; hann hafði mikil mæti á hestinum.¹⁸⁴

The brothers had a stallion, black in colour, and it was very savage. It put to flight every horse against which it was pitted. It had such large incisors that they were unlike those of any other horse. Viglund too had a stallion, a yellow dun, the best and most beautiful of horses. He prized the horse greatly.¹⁸⁵

Jökull and Einarr possess a horse that reflects their negative characterisation; it is physically abnormal and extremely aggressive. It is contrasted with Víglundr's horse, which is described in positive superfluous terms. When Víglundr refuses to give his horse to Jökull, the brothers challenge him and his horse to a fight against their stallion. What follows is the most explicit description of horses fighting encountered in the sagas, in which Víglundr's stallion kills the brothers'.¹⁸⁶ Jökull and Einarr do not forget the killing of their horse, and seek vengeance. At first they plan to steal Víglundr's stud-horses, but the stallion defends them so well, they are forced to fight him instead:

En er þeir gátu eigi þat gert, urðu þeir harðla reiðir of sóttu at hestinum með vǫpnum ok vildu drepa hann, en hestrinn varðist með tönnum ok fótum svá rammliga, at þat var lengi nætr, at þeir gátu ekki at gert; en þat varð um síðir, at þeir kómu á hann spjótalögum ok drápu hann svá.¹⁸⁷

When they were unable to do this they got very angry and attacked the stallion with weapons, intending to kill it, but the stallion

¹⁸³ Diana Whaley, "Introduction," in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, ed. Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), xxxi.

¹⁸⁴ Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., "Vígundar saga," in *Kjalnesinga saga Íslenzk fornrit 14* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1959), 77.

¹⁸⁵ Marianne Kalinke, trans., "Vígund's Saga," in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, ed. Diana Whaley (London: Penguin, 2002), 235.

¹⁸⁶ Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., "Vígundar saga," 79. Kalinke, trans., "Vígund's Saga," 237.

¹⁸⁷ Jóhannes Halldórsson, ed., "Vígundar saga," 80.

defended itself so fiercely with both teeth and hooves that the night wore on and they achieved nothing. At last they struck the horse down with their spears and thus killed it.¹⁸⁸

Víglundr's stallion is accorded a death scene comparable with the heroes of these sagas. Although this horse possesses no abnormal physical advantages, it is able to defend itself throughout the entire night. Its courage is that of an ordinary horse, and yet it is extraordinary that this is the only instance of a horse's death described in this way. The stallion is both unwaveringly loyal to its master, as it will not allow the men to steal Víglundr's horses, and also acts as a reflection of Víglundr's noble character. Again, the descriptions of the hero and his rivals are similar to those of their horses. Víglundr is big, strong, and good-looking, while Jökull and Einarr are considered unpopular because of their vicious behaviour, just as their horse is notably vicious.¹⁸⁹

There is a similar episode in *Njáls saga*, preceded by a description of Starkaðr's stallion: *hest góðan, rauðan at lit, ok þótti þeim engi hestr mundu við þeim hafa í vígi* (a good stallion, reddish in colour, and he and his sons thought that no other horse could match it in a fight).¹⁹⁰ Starkaðr's stallion is considered the best fighting horse, a fact that is proved false when it is pitted against Gunnarr's stallion.

Hon segir: „Gunnarr at Hliðarenda á hest brúnan, ok mun hann þora at etja við yðr ok alla aðra.“ „Svá þykkir yðr konum,“ segja þeir, „sem engi muni vera hans maki, en þó at auvirðliga hafi farit fyrir honum Geirr goði eða Gizurr hvíti, þá er eigi ráðit, at oss fari svá.“¹⁹¹

She said, 'Gunnarr of Hliðarenda has a brown stallion and he will dare to fight it against your horse or anybody else's.' 'You women always think that no one is a match for Gunnarr,' said the men, 'but just because Geir the Godi and Gizur the White came off so poorly against him, it doesn't mean that we will too.'¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸ Kalinke, trans., "Vígund's Saga," 238.

¹⁸⁹ Kalinke, trans., "Vígund's Saga," 234, 235.

¹⁹⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 134; Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 98.

¹⁹¹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 148.

¹⁹² Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 99.

Although Hildigunnr has merely suggested Gunnarr's stallion will be able to beat their horse, the men immediately make the equation of such a challenge with an opportunity to open a conflict with Gunnarr himself. The incident in which Gunnarr came into conflict with Geir and Gizur was a conflict of men, rather than of horses, and yet this is the incident with which the challengers compare their situation.

Þorgeirr and Kol plan to make the challenge literal and decide *at þeir myndi hrinda hesti sínum, þá er á rynnisk hestarnir, ok vita, ef Gunnarr felli fyrir* (that the next time the horses went at each other they would give their horse a push and see if this would knock Gunnar down).¹⁹³ However, Gunnarr is able to push his own horse, so that they end up on the floor, with *hestrinn á þá ofan* (the horse on top of them).¹⁹⁴ Not only has their horse failed to defeat Gunnarr's horse, and they have failed to knock Gunnarr over, but they explicitly end up on the floor with their horse on top of them in a ridiculous reversal of the normal rider-horse partnership. The fight then becomes a brawl between horses and men until *Þorgeirr Starkaðarson laust hest Gunnars, svá at út hljóp augat* (Thorgeir Starkardarson struck such a blow at Gunnar's horse that its eye fell out).¹⁹⁵ Despite Solheim's claim that the focus is on the men in this passage, once Gunnarr has knocked both men unconscious, the narrative is clearly focussed on Gunnarr's subsequent order to Kolskeggr: „*Högg þú hestinn, ekki skal hann lifa við orkuml*“ (‘Kill this horse – he must not live maimed’).¹⁹⁶ The death of Gunnarr's horse perhaps foreshadows his own death, as happens in *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 23, when the horses of Þorbjörn the Stout are discovered dead in the mountains, killed by the

¹⁹³ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 150-151; Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 101.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. Solheim, *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*, 61.

stallion of the man who killed Þorbjörn.¹⁹⁷ That Gunnarr considers his horse a reflection of his own image is suggested by his refusal to allow the horse to live once he has been mutilated. There are laws in *Grágás* that seem strange unless taken in the context of this close relationship between the appearance of the horse and the owner. Stud stallions and *þing* horses (those ridden to the assemblies) were clearly the most valued horses, and docking the tail of one or other incurs no less a punishment than lesser outlawry.¹⁹⁸ The outer appearance of the horse clearly carried valuable symbolic weight.

GIFT-EXCHANGE AND THE “ECONOMY OF HONOUR”

The most common use of horses in the sagas is as gifts. These exchanges usually involved a reciprocal sense of obligation, and triggered conflict if performed incorrectly.¹⁹⁹ A hierarchy can be supposed, where a standard acceptable gift appears to be three mares and a stallion. However, the exchange of horses was not about economic exchange, as can be seen from *Laxdæla saga*, in which Þorleikr refuses to exchange with Eldgrímr the horses Kotkell has given him, even for more than they are worth, because he is determined to honour his social obligation. If Þorleikr were to give away the horses, it would indicate he no longer values them.²⁰⁰

A high value gift of a named stallion, *Heiðarauðr*, is given by Helgi to Bersi in

¹⁹⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga* Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), 33-40, 58; Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Eyrbyggja saga* (Edinburgh: Southside, 1973), 83.

¹⁹⁸ Dennis et al, eds., *Grágás I*, 86.

¹⁹⁹ William Ian Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 17.

²⁰⁰ William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 102; William Ian Miller, *Audun and the Polar Bear: Luck, Law and Largesse in a Medieval Tale of Risky Business* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 112.

Fljótsdæla saga, and a similar exchange takes place in *Bjarnar saga*, in which we see the value of the gift especially emphasised, as the stallion is specifically named as the progeny of Björn's named stallion.²⁰¹

Björn sendir eptir stóðhrossum sínum, er váru hjá stakkgarði, [...] Sá hestr var sonr Hvítings, var alhvítr at lit, en merarnar allar rauðar; en annarr sonr Hvítings var í Þórarinsdal, ok var sá ok hvítr, en merarnar svartar. Nú lætr Björn stóðhrossin önnur leiða til Þorsteins ok kvazk vilja gefa honum,²⁰²

Bjorn sent for his stud-horses, which were close [...] the stallion, a son of Hviting, was pure white, but the mares were all red. There was another son of Hviting in Thorainsdal, also white, but with black mares. Now Bjorn had one group of horses led to Thorstein saying that he wished to present them to him.²⁰³

Þorsteinn, however, will only accept the gift once he has acted as a mediator between Björn and Þórðr. In this situation, Þorsteinn recognises the special value of the gift, but also recognises the extreme obligation under which such a gift will put him. While this episode defines Þorsteinn's status as a morally responsible man, it also emphasises Björn's wealth and status in owning and breeding such horses. Björn, along with Bolli (see below) has a reputation for horse-breeding, and has a remarkable relationship with animals, especially horses. The pure white stallion Hvítigr is given to him by his father in an apparently unique episode, in which the gift is expressly not part of an exchange made within this economy of honour; instead it acts as a “welcome home” present for Björn on his return to Iceland:

In der vorliegenden Passage steht hingegen nicht die Begründung oder Verstärkung reziproker Obligationen im Vordergrund, sondern die emotionale Verbindung Björns zu diesen Tieren, die er gleichsam als Willkommensgeschenk von seinen Verwandten erhält.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Jón Jóhannesson, ed., “Fljótsdæla saga,” 256; Young and Haworth, trans., “The Fljotsdale Saga,” 37.

²⁰² Sigurður Nordal, ed., “Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa,” 187.

²⁰³ Finlay, trans., “The Saga of Bjorn,” 203.

²⁰⁴ Sigurður Nordal, ed., “Bjarnar saga Hítöelakappa,” 136; Finlay, trans., “The Saga of Bjorn,” 170; Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, 68.

However, in the preceding passage the emphasis stands not on the justification or support of reciprocal obligation, but on the emotional bond between Björn and these animals, which he receives as quasi welcome presents from his relatives.

Such an emotional gift may explain the attachment Björn has towards his animals.

When Björn is staying with Þórðr, he clearly considers his *þrjá gangandi gripi* (three valuable animals) to be of greater importance than his host's, and the men complain that Björn is giving the best food to his animals, to the detriment of the household.²⁰⁵

While Andersson suggests these acts are symbols of Björn's provocative nature, Rohrbach instead suggests this episode indicates Björn's belief in the equality of men and animals, in opposition to his rival, who sees men as a higher class of beings.²⁰⁶

The value of a gift-horse acted as a mirror of the recipient, and if the value was unclear or unconsidered, such a gift could be interpreted as an insult. In *Njáls saga*, such an unclear exchange impacts negatively on both the giver and the recipient:

Skarpheðinn átti hest brúnan, fjögurra vetra, bæði mikinn ok sjáligan; hann var graðr ok hafði ekki verit fram leiddr; þann hest gaf Skarpheðinn Höskuldi ok með hross tvau.²⁰⁷

Skarpheðin had a dark-brown horse, four years old, big and handsome. It was a stallion and had not yet fought another horse. Skarpheðin gave this horse to Hoskuld, along with two mares.²⁰⁸

This gift appears to be a suitable one to maintain the friendship between the two men: the horse is a stallion, and *bæði mikinn ok sjáligan* (both large and handsome) – to all intents and purposes a *wertvolles Pferd* (worth-full horse).²⁰⁹ However, the stallion is accompanied with only two mares (the usual number is four or more), and is untested

²⁰⁵ Sigurður Nordal, ed., “Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa,” 139; Finlay, trans., “The Saga of Bjorn,” 172.

²⁰⁶ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 139. Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, 69.

²⁰⁷ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 276.

²⁰⁸ Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 184.

²⁰⁹ Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, 97.

in combat – something Mörðr does not hesitate to point out.²¹⁰ Interestingly, Mörðr refers to the gift as a *vánfola* (vicious horse/foal), and Höskuldr as *óreyndr* (inexperienced), implying that Höskuldr would be unable to control this horse.²¹¹ Skarpheðinn's choice of gift invites such an interpretation, although the saga-author has characterised Mörðr as a figure determined to interpret everything to his advantage.

Less ambiguously, an outright insult is offered in *Hávarðar saga Ísafjörður* when Þorbjörn offers an old horse to Hávarðr that is *grár at lit, afgamall ok baksárr, ok hefir jafnan legit afvelta hingat til* (grey in colour, very old and sore-backed and he has lain on his back unable to rise until now).²¹² The description of this horse matches previous descriptions of Hávarðr, and so the comparison is clear. This is a parody of the usual gift exchange as this “gift” is designed to further the bad feeling between the families, instead of foster an alliance. The horse has been named Dött, but by the *sveinarnir* (servants, boys) rather than Þorbjörn himself, and Þorbjörn tells Hávarðr *far þú heim með hestinn, ef þú vill, ok eig* (you go home with the horse if you want and have it); an offhand comment that betrays the lack of value it has to its owner.²¹³ However, the old horse is *grár*, which is the colour of Grani and other notable horses from the heroic tradition, perhaps implying an inherent worth despite Þorbjörn's assumptions.

In *Laxdæla saga*, Bolli offers Kjartan horses, which he refuses to accept,

²¹⁰ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 277; Cook, trans., *Njal's Saga*, 185.

²¹¹ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 277; Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 496, 684.

²¹² Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings,” in *Vestfirðinga sögur* Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 308-309; E. Paul Durrenburger and Dorothy Durrenburger, trans., *The Saga of Hávarður of Ísafjörður* (Enfield Lock, Middlesex: Hisarlik Press, 1996), 57.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

claiming that he has no interest in them. Kjartan has been long in Norway and perhaps no longer wishes to define himself by Icelandic standards. As we have seen from my analysis above, the manner in which a character accepts a gift defines their status and relationship with the giver. In this case, by refusing Bolli's offer, Kjartan is acknowledging this exchange system, and refusing to positively engage with it:

Bolli átti stóðhross þau, er bezt vǫru kǫlluð; hestrinn var mikill ok vænn ok hafði aldregi brugðizk at vígi; hann var hvítur at lit ok rauð eyrun ok topprinn. Þar fylgðu þrjú merhryssi með sama lit sem hestrinn. Þessi hross vildi Bolli gefa Kjartani, en Kjartan kvazk engi vera hrossamaðr ok vildi eigi þiggja. Óláfr bað hann við taka hrossunum, - „ok eru þetta inar virðuligstu gjafar.“ Kjartan setti þvert nei fyrir.²¹⁴

Bolli had some stud-horses which were considered exceptionally fine. The stallion was a big, handsome animal, and had never been beaten in a fight; he was a white horse, with red ears and a red forelock. Three mares went with him, all of the same colouring as the stallion. Bolli wanted to give these horses to Kjartan; but Kjartan said he had no interest in horses, and refused to accept them. Olaf begged him to accept the horses – ‘for this is a magnificent gift.’ But Kjartan flatly refused.²¹⁵

The original phrasing: *Kjartan kvazk engi vera hrossamaðr* makes an analogy between Bolli, and other Icelanders who breed horses, and a *hrossamaðr* (groom), which is the equine equivalent of the low-class *sauðamaðr* (shepherd).²¹⁶ Bolli's gift of four horses, one of which is a stallion, is of appropriate value to offer his foster brother. These are not just excellent horses, but called the best; and again, the “large, handsome and skilled at fighting” formula is repeated. The colouring is unusual, and Kjartan's father, Óláfr Peacock encourages him to accept the gift, which in turn suggests its value, as Óláfr Peacock is a good and diplomatic man. Kjartan's contrary action contributes to the feud between the two families.

In *Gunnlaugs saga*, Gunnlaugr is offered two sets of horses by the father of

²¹⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, 135.

²¹⁵ Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *Laxdæla Saga*, 160.

²¹⁶ Cleasby and Guðbrandur Vigfússon, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 287, 515.

Helga the Fair, whom he wishes to wed. Ordinarily, this would be a positive step towards creating an alliance with Þorsteinn, but Gunnlaugr recognises that Þorsteinn is attempting to distract or appease him with fine horses to prevent him from further pursuing his marriage suit. The first stallion Þorsteinn offers is a poor choice of gift: instead of being large, handsome and experienced, this stallion is *allvænligr ok lítt reyndr* (all-promising, but little experienced), which is perhaps how Þorsteinn views Gunnlaugr. Gunnlaugr refuses, so Þorsteinn then offers a *grár* stallion, which is the *baztr í Borgarfirði* (best in Borgarfjörð), but even though owning such a horse would reflect well on Gunnlaugr, unlike Björn, and like Kjartan, Gunnlaugr refuses to take part in this aspect of the economy of honour, and refuses to define himself by horse-owning.²¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the relationship between the horse and the hero in the *Íslendingasögur*. Horse-fights, failed or successful gifts, and occasions of misuse and theft are among the most common exhibitions of this relationship in these sagas; but there are also rarer instances in which a detailed description accompanies the slaying of a particular horse. From these episodes, it can be seen that a man's horse could be a vital part of his image, and needed to be cared for, selected, and exchanged in a way that reflected positively on this image. A man's saddle and bridle could also act as a substitution for the horse itself, and while the removal of such helped to disguise the hero in *Víga-Glúms saga*, the use of it meant that a man maintained his identity, as in *Gísla saga Súrssonar*. The owning, riding, breeding and exchanging of good horses were, rather than commercial economic

²¹⁷ Sigurður Nordal, ed., "Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu," 65.

practices, practices invested in the exchange and pursuit of honour.

Horses played an important part in the social lives of these saga heroes, and social activities involving horses were considered a vital part of masculine development into a courageous and morally responsible member of Icelandic society. Gifts of horses were also used to create and improve alliances within this economy of honour, and the giving or receiving of a gift could increase a man's status, although such exchanges usually entailed obligation; to refuse a gift, or to offer an inappropriate exchange, often had fatal consequences.²¹⁸ The misuse of horses is far more common than theft in these sagas, and such misuse may have suggested the owner of the horse was a weak merchant in this economy as such episodes are rarely left unchallenged. However, the role of the horse in these sagas is not uniform, but depends on the hero. Some sagas, such as *Bjarnar saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Njáls saga* and *Víglundar saga*, appear to exhibit strong resemblances between the heroes and their horses. In other sagas, such as *Laxdæla Saga*, there are no horse-hero pairings, and instead the primary use of horses is in gift exchange. All of these episodes contribute to or comment on the hero's character and status.

There is an interesting contrast between the three instances of horse-slaying in these sagas. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Þorbjörn's horses are found slain by Þórarinn's stallion, after Þórarinn has slain Þorbjörn. In *Víglundar saga*, Jökull and Einarr slay Víglundr's stallion in a battle reminiscent of Gunnarr or Björn's valiant death scenes. In *Hrafnkels saga* we have a third example again, where Freyfaxi has a bag placed over his head and is pushed off a cliff. These three examples demonstrate most clearly how the use of horses varies significantly from saga to saga. In the example from

²¹⁸ Rohrbach calls this *Übertragungspotential* (over-transformation-potential) and considered gifts as the basis of the metonymic relationship between horses and humans in the sagas. Rohrbach, *Der tierische Blick*, 177.

Eyrbyggja saga, Þorbjörn's horses mirror the situation of Þorbjörn and his enemies, and suffer the same fate; in *Víglundar saga*, however, this same relationship between the character of the hero and the characteristics of the horse is evident, but Víglundr's horse dies the death of the hero, while Víglundr instead survives. *Hrafnkels saga* perhaps portrays a similar relationship, as the execution of the horse echoes Hrafnkell's humiliation, and Hrafnkell, like Víglundr, continues to live and to prosper.

However, the whole relationship between the hero and the horse must be considered when comparing these two events. From the horse-fight episodes in *Víglundar saga*, it is evident that Víglundr's stallion acts as a reflection of his character, and works to increase his honour-status. In contrast, *Hrafnkels saga* attempts to move away from this reliance on the horse. By showing Hrafnkell as a man first misled into danger by Freyfaxi, and then prosperous again after his death, despite the horse's leading role in the opening of the saga the emphasis is laid on the man, rather than the horse-hero partnership. This could be interpreted as simply a refutation of the power of Freyr, however it could also be considered as opposing the heroic traditions that form the oral and literary ancestors of these sagas. Just as Hrafnkell is not a traditional heroic character, so Freyfaxi is not allowed to be a traditional heroic horse. On the other hand, *Víglundar saga*, despite being heavily influenced by later native and non-native literary developments, ascribes huge positive symbolic significance to the horse.

There is a shift in the way the horse-hero relationship is presented and used in these sagas; the relationship is often indirect, and relies perhaps on the familiarity of the saga audience with the poetic traditions explored in my first two chapters. By assuming such knowledge of the heroic tradition, we can see how certain events are more than simple descriptions of horses or social exchanges, and how the Christian

author of *Hrafnkels saga* can refute this tradition to make a point about the heroic origins of this horse-hero relationship. Despite their claim to historicity, the function of the horse cannot be merely considered a part of the attempted realism of the sagas: instead, it occupies a privileged space and contributes to the development and definition of the hero within this economy of honour, in ways that are appropriate for the medieval Icelandic hero.

CONCLUSION

The Horse and his Hero: a symbiotic relationship

The aim of this thesis was to chart the relationship between the horse and the hero in two stages of Icelandic literature. The first half of this thesis demonstrates the close relationship between horses and heroes in Scandinavian heroic poetic sources. The repeated pairing of Aðils and Hrafn suggests that even pseudo-historical figures could have been perceived as having this close relationship. My first chapter examines ways in which horses were closely linked with heroes as partners to heroic action, and considered an important part of heroic narratives. In *Hesta heiti* the breadth of legendary and mythological horses is revealed, and the name meanings often reflect attributes valued by a warrior culture, for example battle prowess and impressive appearance. *Þorgrímsþula* also emphasises the heroic partnership between the horse and his rider, and perhaps indicates that poems like *Kálfsvísa* and *Hesta heiti* were common, and that horses were prolific in heroic narratives.

The evidence presented in my second chapter, on eddic poetry, also suggests a close relationship between the horse and the hero developed in both the legends of Germanic origin (the Sigurðr-cycle) and the Scandinavian Helgi-cycle, and that the

horses in these episodes can be used to define heroic actions and character, distinguish heroic men from their peers, and contribute to the development and self-definition of the hero. The main theme to emerge from this chapter was the importance of possession, and the negativity of lack of control. Sigurðr and Helgi are portrayed as ideal horsemen, and defined by their superior horses.

As can be seen in my third chapter, control over one's horses is also emphasised in the *Íslendingasögur*, for example in *Njáls saga*, where Otkell would rather contribute to the feud with Gunnarr than admit he could not control his horses. However, as the second half of this thesis demonstrates, in the medieval sagas, control is more often demonstrated through the owning, giving and lending of horses, rather than riding. Multiple laws in *Grágás* are concerned with the different levels of horse-lending, which was clearly an important part of Icelandic society and often abused; perhaps a man, even if an excellent rider himself, was considered unable to contribute to the economy of honour, if unable to control how another man used his horse. However, literal riding skills still underpinned Icelandic society, as the law determined whether a man was mentally capable of assuming a position of authority based on his ability to saddle a horse correctly.²¹⁹

The use of horses in these sagas is complex and varied, but a man's horse ultimately acted as a commodity to be displayed and exchanged in order to increase his honour and status. The horse was closely entwined in the social activities of young Icelandic men, and considered vital to the development of a strong masculine identity. Gifts and responses to gifts in these narratives often operate as comments on the giver and recipient's honour and character, and tension can be observed between the idea of the horse as heroic accoutrement inherited from the earlier poetry, and the

²¹⁹ Andrew Dennis, Peter Godfrey Foote and Richard Perkins, eds., *Laws of early Iceland: Grágás II* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 5-6.

realistic impression of the horse as a physical commodity in Icelandic society. However, such a divide need not be impermeable, as this “horse-commodity” is the accoutrement of the saga-hero, and vital to maintaining his standing in an honour-led economy.

The physical appearance of the horse was also used as a mirror of the owner or rider. In *Njáls saga*, Gunnarr’s horse is blinded in one eye in a horse fight, and Gunnarr orders Kolskeggr to kill him. Although it may be that Gunnarr is reacting to a practical problem, and that a one-eyed horse would be less able to negotiate the Icelandic terrain or fulfil its role as a fighting animal, to consider this episode as a response to a literal problem is to forget the nature of these sagas: while memories of real events were preserved within this tradition, these had been supplemented by imagination and the interests of storytellers and audiences during the long period of oral preservation.²²⁰ The practical, realistic issue of the inability to ride to the Alþing, or to participate in horse-fights, restricts the hero’s ability to function in masculine Icelandic society on a symbolic level. The lack of an effective horse meant that Gunnarr would be unable to continue to function as a man in this society; this thesis also demonstrates that horses are used to mirror the great size, virility and strong nature of the Icelandic hero, and therefore a maimed horse may indicate a maimed hero. Blindness, especially one-eyed blindness has a number of connotations in Old Norse literature, including castration, and the mutilation and death of Gunnarr’s horse is a culmination of the symbolic resonance of horses in this literature.

The horse-hero partnership as exhibited in earlier poetry and other sagas could also be acknowledged, used and refuted by the saga-author to make a point. In *Hrafnkels saga*, Freyfaxi is used as a platform for religious and moral change, rather

²²⁰ Gísli Sigurðsson, *Saga and Oral Tradition*, 253.

than as a partner to Hrafnkell. Overall, the horses in the *Íslendingasögur* were appropriate to the medieval Icelandic hero they partnered, as the changing social-historical context of the sagas' composition affected the function of the imagined horse.

Aspects of research that could be pursued further can be divided into three lines of enquiry: one based on the horse, one on the hero, and the other on comparative literatures. An examination of the relationship between women and horses in Old Norse sources could make an interesting companion study to this current thesis, as discussions of Sigurðr and Grani, must involve Guðrún, or Brynhildr, and Oddrún and Sigrún are the only two women allowed on horseback in the eddic poems. Such instances of female riding are equally rare in the *Íslendingasögur*. A second way to further this study could be to consider other heroic accoutrements that can be seen to have a relationship with the hero, such as swords or ships, and compare how these inanimate relationships are presented and used in relation to that of the horse and the hero. The relationship between the horse and the hero in foreign traditions could also provide interesting points of comparison, and a comparative study of the use of horses in early Irish sagas and Old Norse literature could reveal another aspect of cultural exchange.²²¹

To return to the beginning of this thesis, the figure of Aðils, and the trilogy of Aðils-Hrafn-Áli discussed in my first chapter, could also yield interesting conclusions if examined further. The *fornaldarsögur* record Aðils owning good horses, and his presence in *Kálfsvísa* suggests this may have been an important part of his legendary status, suggesting that the collecting of good horses for engagement in the economy of honour was not just a feature of characters from the *Íslendingasögur*. This project

²²¹ Gísli Sigurðsson suggests the Celtic world had a significant impact on the literature of the north. Gísli Sigurðsson, *Saga and Oral Tradition*, 5.

could be extended by looking for horse-collecting episodes in texts other than the *Íslendingasögur*. However, it is possible that Snorri emphasises the horse-collecting feature of Aðils in his *Prose Edda* and *Ynglinga saga* because he is an Icelandic writer, and it may be possible that as written texts, these sources have been influenced by the medieval Icelandic society in which they were recorded. Perhaps the concept of the hero may have been recast by these medieval Icelanders within their own concepts of masculinity and self-value, which were bound up with the owning, breeding and management of good horses.

In both poetic and prose sources, horses acted as an established commodity in an economy of honour on which the status of the hero depended. Although circumstance and contexts may have changed over time, the masculinity and honour of the hero is always at stake in these narratives, and the hero's horse acts as an effective symbol of his character and achievements, whether this is through victory over an enemy in battle, the acquisition of gold or the successful participation in a horse-fight.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1.

Names with assumed mythological associations (either found listed elsewhere in Snorri's <i>Prose Edda</i> or the <i>Poetic Edda</i>).				
<i>Kálfsvísa</i> (K), <i>Hesta heiti</i> (HH) and <i>Þorgrímsþula</i> (Þ).				
ON	ModE	Ref.	Rider	Category
1 <i>Alsviðr</i>	all-swift	HH 3.3	Sun-horse	-
2 <i>Árvakr</i>	early-awakener	HH 3.4	Sun-horse	-
3 <i>Falhófnir</i>	pale-hoof	HH 2.3 Þ 3.4	Æsir	colour
4 <i>Fjörsvartnir</i>	life-darkener	HH 2.2	Night-horse	-
5 <i>Gils</i>	ravine, or, meaning unknown, but commonly used in personal Icelandic names.	Þ 3.4	Æsir	Terrain?
6 <i>Glaðr</i>	bright	HH 1.1	Æsir	brightness
7 <i>Glær</i>	bright	HH 1.1 Þ 3.5	Æsir	brightness
8 <i>glitnir</i>	shining one	HH 1.3	Gná	Shining
9 <i>Gullinfaxi / Gullfaxi</i>	gold(en) mane	HH 1.2 Þ 2.6	Hrungnir (giant)	Gold
10 <i>Gulltoppr</i>	gold-tuft	HH 1.3 Þ 1.5	Heimdallr	Gold

11	<i>Gyllir</i>	golden	HH 1.1 þ 3.6	Æsir	Gold
12	<i>Hamskarpr</i>	skin-sharp	HH 4.5	-	Battle?
13	<i>Hófvarpnir</i>	hoof-thrower	HH 4.6	Asyniur - Gná	Motion / battle?
14	<i>Hrímfaxi</i>	rime-mane	HH 4.8	Night-horse	-
15	<i>Léttfeti</i>	light-pacer	HH 2.1 þ 1.3	Æsir	Motion
16	<i>Silfrtoppr</i>	silver-forelock	HH 1.5 þ 2.4	Æsir	Shining
17	<i>Sinir</i>	sinewy	HH 1.5 þ 2.4	Æsir	Prowess
18	<i>Skeiðbrimir</i>	gallop-glittering	HH 1.4 þ 3.5	Æsir	Motion /glittering
19	<i>Skinfaxi</i>	shining-mane	HH 1.7 HH 4.7	Sun-horse	-
20	<i>Sleipnir</i>	slippy, or one who slips	HH 1.6 þ 1.1	Óðinn	motion

TABLE 2.

Names with an assumed heroic background.					
ON	ModE	Ref.	Rider	Category	
1	<i>Blakkr</i>	dun-coloured / dark brown	K 4.1 HH 3.5 þ 2.3	Björn	Colour

			K 1.6		
2	<i>Blóðhófr/ Blóðughófr</i>	Blood(y)-hoof	HH 4.5	Freyr / Atriða	Battle
			Þ 2.6		
			K 1.4		
3	<i>Fákr</i>	swift	HH 2.1	Háki	Motion
			Þ 2.5		
4	<i>Fólkvir</i>	unknown	K 4.6	Haraldr	Unknown.
5	<i>Glaumr</i>	merry noise	K 4.3	Atli	Human interaction
			K 4.7		
6	<i>Gota / Goti</i>	Gothic horse	HH 1.7	Gunnarr	Human interaction
			Þ 1.5		
7	<i>Grani</i>	whiskers, upper lip	K 4.8 HH 1.8	Sigurðr	Human interaction
8	<i>Höðr</i>	Battle	K 1.3	Hjálmþer	Battle
9	<i>Hölkvir</i>	a horse with an even pace	K 4.5 HH 3.1	Högni	Motion
			K 3.1		
10	<i>Hrafn</i>	raven	HH 3.1	Áli	Motion
			Þ 1.1		
11	<i>Körtr</i>	unripe berry/fruit	K 4.2	Bíarr	Colour
12	<i>Móðnir</i>	fierce one	K 1.2 HH 4.2	Dvalinn	Battle
			K 2.3		
13	<i>Mór</i>	brown	HH 3.8	Meinþjófr	Colour
			Þ 1.7		

			K 1.7		
14	<i>Skævaðr</i>	racer	HH 1.6	Helgi	Motion
			þ 2.2		
15	<i>Slungnir</i>	hurl, fling	K 4.4	Aðils	Motion
			K 2.2		
16	<i>Stúfr</i>	stump	HH 1.8	Vífill	Human interaction
			þ 2.1		
17	<i>Vakr</i>	wakeful / lively	K 2.4	Morginn	Motion?
			HH 2.5		
			K 2.1		
18	<i>Valr</i>	hawk	HH 2.2	Vésteinn	Motion
			þ 1.3		
19	<i>Vingskornir</i>	land-ploughing one, or implying unsteady motion	HH 3.2	Sigrdrífa	Motion

TABLE 3.

Other heiti (no evidence of being used as individual names, but no evidence they were not).					
	ON	ModE	Ref.	Rider	Category
1	<i>alsvartr</i>	all-black	HH 4.3	-	Colour
2	<i>alvarr</i>	all-cautious	HH 3.3	-	Motion
3	<i>apli</i>	bull	HH 4.3	-	Bull-heiti?
4	<i>askr</i>	ash (tree)	HH 4.4	-	Horse-tree
5	<i>bautuðr</i>	beater	HH 3.7	-	Battle?
6	<i>bölpvari</i>	evil-borer	HH 3.5	-	Battle?
7	<i>bráinn</i>	Flickering-one, or the eye-lid: <i>brá</i> (eye-lid)	HH 3.8	-	Shining /motion
8	<i>brúnn</i>	dark-brown	HH 4.6	-	Colour

9	<i>Drasill / Drösull</i>	mount	K 1.1 HH 3.4	-	Word for horse
10	<i>fengr</i>	booty	HH 2.3	-	Treasure? Battle?
11	<i>fetmóðr</i>	pace-tired	HH 2.4	-	Motion
12	<i>ffötri</i>	fettered	HH 4.1	-	?
13	<i>Gisl</i>	Ray or beam, or, hostage	HH 1.4	-	Shining? Battle?
14	<i>hástigi</i>	high-stepper	HH 3.6	-	Motion
15	<i>hestr</i>	horse	HH 4.1	-	Word for horse
16	<i>jór</i>	stallion	HH 3.7 þ 2.6	-	Word for horse
17	<i>jörmuni</i>	mighty one	HH 3.8	-	Battle/prowess
18	<i>Lungr</i>	swift	HH 2.4 þ 1.7	-	Motion
19	<i>malfeti</i>	gravel-pacer	HH 4.4	-	Motion
20	<i>marr</i>	charger	HH 3.7 þ 1.7	-	Word for horse
21	<i>móinn</i>	brown (or, moor – serpent <i>heiti</i> ?)	HH 4.1	-	Colour
22	<i>róni</i>	possibly related to <i>rúni</i> (friend, counsellor)	HH 4.2	-	Word for horse
23	<i>skær</i>	sprinter	HH 1.8	-	Motion
24	<i>Sóti</i>	soot	þ 1.6	-	Colour
25	<i>Tjaldari</i>	ambler	HH 2.6 þ 1.4	-	Motion
26	<i>veðr</i>	gust / weather	HH 2.7	-	Motion
27	<i>Vegbjartr</i>	way-bright	HH 3.1	-	Motion? Shining?

28	<i>vegdraupnir</i>	way-dripping	HH 2.8	-	Motion? Gold?
29	<i>víðir</i>	willow-tree	HH 2.7	-	Terrain?
			HH 2.7		
30	<i>Vigg / viggr</i>	steed	HH 4.7	-	Word for horse
			Þ 2.1		
31	<i>vígglitnir</i>	war-glittering	HH 2.5	-	Battle/shining
32	<i>vindr</i>	wind	HH 2.6	-	Motion
33	<i>virfill</i>	flexible, supple	HH 4.8	-	Prowess?

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