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OLD AGE IN THE SAGAS

MA Thesis in Medieval Studies

Central European University

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by

Csákváry Orsolya

(Hungary)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,

Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements

of the Master of Arts degree in Medieval Studies

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU

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Chair, Examination Committee

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Thesis Supervisor

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I, the undersigned, **Csákváry Orsolya**, candidate for the MA degree in Medieval Studies declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Budapest, 30 May 2011

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Signature

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Introduction

"It is true what they said in the old days that 'the older you get, the wetter you become.'" [1] This proverb in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* catches the attention. What did it mean exactly? Did it have a negative connotation? Was this the average description of elderly people? Was this the perception of the people of Iceland about their fathers and grandfathers in the Viking Era (around 793-1066)? Did every man share the same opinion? Did everybody receive the same assessment? These are important and crucial questions for the understanding of the society of the Icelandic Free State. And these are the questions I intend to answer.

If one reads the sagas, one can say without much exaggeration that they swarm with aged men and women. This rich presence of the elderly does not only give a special flavor to the sagas, but it also makes it possible to examine this side of the social life and mentality in Iceland in the Viking Age. From the 1970s and 1980s, several scholarly works have been written that established a new way of looking at society and thus belong to the broadly defined term of "new social history." These works highlight the histories of those who did not directly influence events with their decisions or who were seemingly less important in the "big game." Such relatively recent fields of study are, for example, the history of women (under the aegis of gender studies), the history of children, and the history of emotions.[2] An increasing number of studies have also appeared in connection with the history of ordinary people, peasants, craftsmen, soldiers and even the forgotten or formerly neglected

[1] *The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi*, 277. "Satt er flest það, er fornkveðið er, að svo ergist hver sem eldist. Verður sú lítil virðing, sem snemma leggst á, ef maður lætur síðan sjálfur af með ósóma og hefir eigi traust til að reka þess réttar nokkurt sinni, og eru slík mikil undur um þann mann, sem hraustur hefir verið." *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 17, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 16, 2011).

[2] Peter N. Stearns, "Social History Present and Future," *Journal of Social History* 37, No. 1 (2003): 9-19.

people like prostitutes, criminals, and beggars.[3] These data, stories, and lives can bring one closer to a better understanding of earlier centuries.

Literary sources such as the sagas can also help one enter the world of ancestors. These Icelandic prosaic literary texts from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries are perfect examples of entertaining but also informative historical material. In an analysis proper source criticism must accompany the reading and questions must be asked. Is that really what saga narrators wanted to say? Is that what really happened? Did I ask the right questions in the right context? Or some more complex questions like: What were the prevailing stereotypes? How did the author's literary toolkit influence the ways he (or she?) represents the characters at their various life stages? Could there be reasons for presenting a distorted picture? These concerns are hard to answer correctly, but any research can add small pieces of information to the overall picture. My main goal is to give several possible answers to my research questions, and to contribute, if only in a rather limited way, to the general understanding of the Viking Age society of Iceland.

My main research questions are the following concerning the old age and elderly people in the sagas: How are they described? What was old people's personal understanding about their age? How were old people treated by society? The first question concerns the looks of old people and intends to find patterns with which the saga tellers described the characters in the sagas. It considers how the figure and look (both the physical and mental) of average old persons were depicted, and it also investigates the expectations and prejudices which were connected to this period of life. The second question seeks an answer to the overall reaction of elderly people themselves to their changing state and status in society. It highlights the different

[3] For example, Andrew McCall, *The Medieval Underworld* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 2004); See in general: Kenneth Pomeranz, "Social History and World History: from Daily Life to Patterns of Change," *Journal of World History* 18 (2007): 69-98.

reactions, the different strategies the aged followed to accept (or deny) their new place in the society. How could someone keep or regain his or her old place in this society? The third, and maybe the most complex question, examines the different approaches society took to their aged relatives and fellow Icelanders. When did old age actually start? Who was considered to be old at this time? How could they secure the future of their descendants? What was the overall opinion about the capabilities of the elderly? How should they die to satisfy their children? Finally, I address the issue of the difference between the men and women in their last stage of life. Was there any difference between how old men and women were treated and how far this gender-specific distinction could be neutralized?

I hope that through the issues raised here I can get closer to understanding the mentality of the Icelanders and the ways they constructed patterns about themselves and others. I am aware that one also needs to read between the lines of the sagas to distinguish the everyday "reality" from the perceptions imposed by the rules of literary compositions and the ideas and thoughts that were added later. I am aware of the fact that in many cases no definitive answers can be given, but I intend to contribute with some thoughts on the already existing research in the field of saga study.

1 Old Age in Former Research

Historical research started to take old age – together with other stages of human life – into consideration as a significant field in social and cultural history in the 1960s and 1970s, although the exploration and the debates on this topic started already at the very early date of the Antiquity. Research on old age in our present time began its carrier in a rather particular way, as it was using the bits and pieces of information of the different disciplines such as social sciences, demography, or anthropology, with different accentuation. The breakthrough in this study happened with the change of attitudes towards the narrative sources and their usage in historical research. This huge thesaurus of the remembrance (with proper source criticism) gives an immense amount of completely new and diverse material into the hands of the historian. Historians agree that the usage of different approaches in the researches can provide us with a more accurate understanding of the old people state, number or role in the different societies. However every academic tradition has its own willingly used tool to examine old age. Areas of research are for example: demography, material concerns, geographical distribution of elderly people, household structures, property transactions, the history of medicine and many more.[4] In this field of study, most of the efforts concentrate on examining the white, European communities' approach to their fathers' and grandfathers' generation. The research in this manner

[4] For example, concerning family relationships, in an intriguing article Joel T. Rosenthal, "Three-Generation Families. Searching for Grandpa and Grandma in Late Medieval England" examines the proportion of the three-generational households. Here he suggests an important question about the research methods, namely that the researchers often examine the today important questions and concepts in this time period with possibly other or at least differently emphasized interests. His main problem however is that relatively scarce material is available in this matter. Joel T. Rosenthal, "Three-Generation Families. Searching for Grandpa and Grandma in Late Medieval England" in *Medieval Family Roles. A Book of Essay*, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 225-237, passim.

needs the exploration of other cultures holding to their aged and also to a possibly comparison of the results. The only problem with this conception is that the comparison between the different cultures is extremely hard, since according to some opinions, even the comparison between the different regions of one country may be problematic.[5] Another problem with this research field is that relatively few books have been concerned exclusively with this life stage in its historic understanding. Extensive monographic works are rare, while the smaller essays or "sweeping narratives" rule the terrains old age research. This mosaic-like effect, which is compiled of different researches from diverse times and places, does not help to develop a solid idea of this discipline. [6] A further difficulty, besides the necessity of summing up the results is that several authors have so far paid too much attention to the average life expectancy, which is rather swampy data to use, especially for medieval times.

It is important that one should take the gender perspective into consideration (which has become prominent in recent research). Pat Thane mentions in her essay that the theory of Georges Minois and Joel Rosenthal of the missing old women, where they suppose of old age to be a territory of men, is rather outdated.[7] Among the several difficulties I mention only one more, the unclearness of the calculation of old age, in an absolute number of years. The reasons and the ages why and when a man or a woman started to be (or feel) old differs from place-to-place, era-to-era and social level-to-social level. In some places there were regulations, and more frequently there existed some customs or traditions for this, but these can also differ from one another

[5] Pat Thane, "Social Histories of Age and Aging," *Journal of Social History*, 37/1 (2003): 93-94.
[6] Susannah R Ottaway, *The Decline of Life. Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 277-278.
[7] Pat Thane, "Social Histories of Age and Aging," 94-95. "Within every social category old men were more numerous than old women, many of whom died prematurely from the effects of childbirth." Georges Minois, *History of Old Age. From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, tr. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 180.

although several similarities can be found in this context. For instance the capability to work as a measuring was such a tool for the old age. These problems and difficulties regarding the research of the old age, however, do not mean that the whole story is unrecoverable, but that the research is yet in a promising and exciting transitional condition.[8]

The real discourse on old age, however, started in the twelfth century, based highly on Aristotle and the Arabic commentaries of his works.[9] Their interests lay mainly on the medical, psychological and theological aspects of old age.[10] However, the concepts and definitions in the different tractates and genres were diverse and sometimes antagonistic. The beginning of old age started in the medical treatises from as early as thirty-five or forty years of age, but the mentioned treatments for the different age-related syndromes were suggested to start only from sixty or sixty-five years of age. The physical descriptions of the elderly were almost always rigid and accurate, sometimes even cruel. Gender-specific differences also existed; however, the female narrative is scarce. It is interesting that while the elderly men were considered as alike in the physiologic description of their age in all social strata, a difference was made between the elderly women of the higher and lower social classes after the menopause (which gave a definite borderline for the old age for the women).[11] The difference between the two genders according to their old age is significant. Women were usually considered to age faster and became old earlier in life, because the signs of ageing are more obvious in their case. For the men, old age meant mostly the loss of their powers, it "attacked their manhood," the women after

[8] Pat Thane, "Social Histories of Age and Aging," 97-98.
[9] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2004), 36.
[10] However, Georges Minois states that „as long as there was no legal age for retirement, old age was not recognized as such in the texts." Georges Minois, *History of Old Age. From Antiquity to the Renaissance.* [5] This reflects to the previous comment on the hardness of examining the period because of the altering results of the research in the different contexts.
[11] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages,* 36- 44.

ageing were "reduced in the eyes of society" in every respect. In general, the attributes assigned to the elderly were usually negative: "greed, inebriation, quick temper, envy and spite."[12] The previously emphasized positive aspects in the perception of old age, such as the respect for wise old men, have not been regarded as typical in recent research.

In almost every context, opposite sides of a theory were believed to have been true at one and the same time. The body was because of its weakness and ugliness either evil (in the case of old women even poisonous) and unattractive, or nearer to God while it already lacked any temptations and was tortured by sicknesses. The old (or deformed) body either mirrored the soul, or it hid only the pure and clear spirit of the person. While the main conception was that the young body expressed purity, the older one, however, lost its bodily affections and (as already mentioned) was in want of temptations.[13]

The role and status of the elderly people is also an important element in the research. Pat Thane states in her article that the aged tried to retain their power over their properties because they wanted not to rely on their children's favor to care for them and supply them with the essentials for life. This attitude was also connected with the loss (or decrease) of their social status. Old people seldom lived together with their offspring (they guarded their independence), but the emotional ties were close between the generations.[14] This connection could of course lack, mostly in the case of migrant communities, where the old people usually remained in the homeland. However, the attitudes and perceptions connected to the relationship between the age

[12] Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 166-167.
[13] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 36-59, passim.
[14] This could differ from place to place, of course. Besides the family structure is the most unstable factor in the demography of the pre-industrial period. I thank for the information to Professor Katalin Szende.

groups were often transferred from the original cultural context. Pat Thane also ascertains that in every community a communal care system existed for the poor, the elderly and the elderly poor people.[15] In addition, it is also pointed out, that there were significant differences between the attitudes in the towns and in rural communities. In the former case the power, property or rule was given to the sons or son-in-laws existed, because it fitted the interests best. The distribution of the property and business was more profitable than the long lasting stability, because of the possible expansion it meant. In case of the landowners and in any agricultural contexts, the classical patriarchal inheritance patterns were applied. The oldest male member of the family, because of the properties' interests, could keep his power till the last days.[16]

These powers were needed too, because the incapacity did not mean complete inactivity. Old people (except for the rich) had to work until they were able to. There was a dichotomy in the case of official (or military) duties. The age limit was either given to fulfill a certain post or permission to leave was required, which was not given automatically because of the ageing. They either found the possibility to earn some money by working, or relied on their sons (which turned to be very often unwise) or tried to make retirement contracts with relatives or even strangers who were willing to support them. The last, and in some places even accepted and regulated, possibility was to beg.[17]

Research on old age is, according to this short summary, a rich field to investigate for the better understanding of past societies. The often noticed adverse attitudes are signs for the controversial and under different conditions rather

[15] Pat Thane, "Social Histories of Age and Aging,"98-111.
[16] David Herlihy, *Women, Children and Society in Medieval Europe: historical essays, 1978-1991*, ed. with an introduction by A. Molho (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), 261-278, passim.
[17] Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300-1500*, 163-215, passim.

changeable approach to this life phase. The sources are in the case of ageing manifold, and thanks to the recent perception of the literary sources as possible material for the historical context, such narrative sources as the sagas can be used as basis' for the research as well.

The research on old age in the context of the Viking Age and especially of the Icelandic society has in the last decade reduplicated. Numerous scholars have begun to work on this issue in Scandinavia. Ole Jørgen Benedictow was one of the first who took up this question in his research,[18] or Bjarni Einarsson in his dissertation where he in detail dealt with this life phase in analyzing Egill Skalla-Grímsson's attitude towards his new state.[19] One of the most recent works in this field is the volume of essays, *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, where the aging as main question was analyzed in detail.[20] Although this discipline is not yet so detailed analyzed as the history of women or of childhood, the continuous work has shed light on a huge amount of interesting details. Like the impact of old age to the social status, the roles of the elderly on the realm of the *gård* or the literary response to this life phase (for example through the analysis of Egill Skalla-Grímssons poems and figure). The elderly people were far from being admired. They social status could not be upheld because of their former deeds, or their wealth. Capability was the only standard – the more one could preserve his or her activeness (both physically and mentally) the more he or she could stay in the previously reached social place and level of regard. Research on old age enlightens a less known area of Viking Age Iceland, but at the same time its results fit conveniently into the European context.

[18] Like his short summary on demographic data in Ole Jørgen Benedictow, „Family Structure," *Medieval Scandinavia. Garland Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages,* vol 1 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 177-183.
[19] Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* (Literary background to Egil's saga) (Oslo: Universitetsforlagets trykningssentral, 1971).
[20] Shannon Lewis-Simpson ed, *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). Scholars like Jón Viðar Sigurðsson or Ármann Jakobsson participated in this work.

2 Sagas as Sources

In my discussion I will use sagas as sources for one aspect of the social history of the Icelandic High Middle Ages. The sagas are vernacular prose historical works (with some inserted poems) which were written down from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. The meaning of the word "saga," which derived from the verb *segja* (meaning to speak, to say), took up the metonymic variant "a history to tell" at the beginning of the saga literature; from the thirteenth century it also began to be used as the equivalent of "written history." There are several types and possible classifications of sagas, the most important groups being the *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of Icelandic early history), the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of the Icelanders), and the *konunga sögur* (kings' sagas).[21] For the purposes of my research, I have selected examples from the group of *Íslendingasögur*.

The main question in connection with the sagas as basically literary texts is their trustworthiness as historical sources. The debate on this topic started as early as the nineteenth century. Before that time nobody (not even scholars) doubted the credibility of the sagas, that is, the assumption was that they are pure and authentic sources of history. Until the nineteenth century the oral tradition was regarded as a true and faithful rendering of the past for historical research. At that time, however, with a change of attitude in scholarship, two sides evolved along two almost irreconcilable lines, which Andreas Heusler (1865-1940) named *Freiprosa* (free-prose) and *Buchprosa* (book-prose) theories.[22] The *Freiprosa* side stated that the oral

[21] Harald and Edvard Beyer, *Norsk Literaturhistorie* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1970), 38-50; Einar Ó. Sveinsson, "Íslendingasögur," [The Sagas of Icelanders] in *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingtid til reformasjonstid*, vol.7 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1962), 495-513.
[22] Andreas Heusler, *Lied und Epos in germanischer Sagendichtung*. (Dortmund: Ruhfus, 1905), passim.

tradition is capable of collecting and preserving the material which is included in the sagas. The "*Buchprosa*ists" were of the opinion that these texts were "only" compilations of different individuals that these are basically written texts which might have some oral elements, but were rather following the tradition of the contemporary European Latin literature.

Both schools of thought had political backgrounds, too. The *Freiprosa*-believers came from two rather different backgrounds. They were (are) either Swedes and Norwegians who assume that the sagas originally came from the Scandinavian peninsula to Iceland, and the only thing that the Icelanders added to the material was their willingness to write the stories down. This reflects an intention to have contributed to this fantastic and peculiar literary (historical?) treasure. The "popular thinking" of Iceland has also adapted this theory, although from a different perspective. In their understanding the texts were preserved and transmitted by their ancestors from generation to generation. This latter possibility, of generational transmission, has since proved to be present in the oral tradition. The *Buchprosa*-supporters were mainly Icelandic scholars who wanted to show, with their emphasis on the original Icelandic compilation, that the whole genre is purely Icelandic, hence the insistence on later literary works produced by medieval Icelandic scholars. This was the way they wanted to show Denmark, Europe, and the world, that they were an independent nation. However, this is only a short summary. There are several other layers in this topic. It is enough to mention, that the whole question was raised by a German and he gained supporters from all over Scandinavia, and, as mentioned, not all Icelanders are on the *Buchprosa* side. One should not forget the Russian (Soviet) research which was not primarily influenced by the political agenda discussed above, which gives a new line of understanding. I do not use this material, however.

During the course of this debate it was shown that several layers of the sagas had or could have absorbed European literary influence, or could have been compiled with the help of different (mainly historical) works.[23] The two sides have, as expected, not fully excluded connections to each other. But besides the previous two directions, a new approach has also developed: to deal closely and only with the texts themselves. With time the need for proper source criticism also emerged from this orientation.[24]

Today the "reanimated" and revised version of the *Freiprosa* theory is more accepted. Here the oral tradition and its process are examined as more differentiated. According to the type of research and the methodology I will use, my exploration is closely linked to this new concept of the *Freiprosa* theory because I will use the sagas as sources for reaching a closer understanding of the Icelandic Middle Ages, the perceptions and the inner workings of society. In this manner, because I intend to use the sagas as narrative sources for my analysis, I also support this new school of saga study.

There is one interesting point to be added to the general observations on saga literature, the use of genealogies, and, more importantly, the presence of skaldic poetry within the prose text. This could be the same tool in the transmission process of the sagas as the different recurring patterns and frameworks in the tales. In addition, it is said that the skaldic poems are the oldest strata of the sagas.[25] The

[23] Gísli Sigurðsson, "Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 285-301, passim and Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* [The Literary background to Egil's saga] (Oslo: Universitetsforlagets trykningssentral, 1971), 194. Else Mundal, "Sagalitteraturen og Soga om Gisle Sursson," [Saga literature and the sagas of Gisle Sursson] in *Soga om Gisle Sursson* (Oslo: Det Norske Samlaget, 1994), 79-81.

[24] Gísli Sigurðsson, "Orality and Literacy in the Sagas of Icelanders," 285-301, passim. For more about the attributes of the oral tradition see Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, tr. Laurence Scott, introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jacobson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

[25] Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland, Society, Sagas, and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 38–48. Else Mundal, "Sagalitteraturen," 85-86. Anne Holtsmark, "Skaldediktning," in

relationship of the sagas and the skaldic verses is bilateral. The poems survived only in the sagas while the sagas used the verses as a kind of crutch in the process of remembering. This process perhaps happened because the poems were worth remembering, so the oral narrator (or the compiler) added the poems to the already existing sagas or built a saga around the poems. Accordingly, it is possible that these poems preserved the sagas. Or on the contrary, that the sagas were preserved just because of these verses, because they could serve as memory aids during oral presentations (just as the genealogical tables, the *þáttr*,[26] and the patterns in the saga plots like feuds or marriages). This question is hard (or even impossible) to decide (yet).

In the following I will give a sort summary of the sagas I used for the present study in order to help in the orientation to the plots and characters discussed. In the main chapter of this study I will use examples from the following sagas: *Bandamanna saga* (The Story of the Confederates), *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Egil's Saga), *Hrafnkjels saga Freysgoða* (The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi), *Droplaugarsona saga* (The Saga of Droplaug's Sons), *Laxdæla saga* (The Saga of the People of Laxardal) and *Brennu-Njals saga* (Njal's Saga). The reasons why I chose these sagas are, on the one hand simple, but, on the other hand, quite complicated. I chose the Bandamanna saga because it chose me. The whole idea of dealing with old age started with this saga, with the interesting and (as it turned out) unique figure of Ófeigr. After this decision the selection of the other five sagas as the basis of my research came rather easily. Egil's saga is one of the best known sagas, with rich lyric inserts and a decisive part on Egill's old age as a model for all elderly people. The *Hrafnkjels saga Freysgoða* and the *Droplaugarsona saga* are two relatively well-known, but in my

Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder fra vikingtid til reformasjonstid, Vol. 15 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1970), 386-390.

[26] Shorter novella-like tales included in or after the sagas. They can also stand alone.

context seemingly not that important, sagas. Both of them, however, add relevant elements or interesting characters to my discussion (like Þorbjörn in the first or Þorstein in the latter saga). The two last sagas contribute with either rich material dealing with relatively many elderly persons, including rather detailed descriptions, or have such extraordinary characters as Unnr in *Laxdæla saga* or Njáll in *Brennu-Njals saga*. The limitation on the number of sagas researched was also partly due to the aim of my study, namely, not to produce a compendium of all references to old age, but to identify certain patterns in the perception and self-perception of this life stage. This limited approach naturally infers the [possibility of need for] further research. When using the sagas as sources I have taken care to use the proper source criticism because of the possibility of a stereotypical description or an instructive tendency in the text. The comparisons of the selected sagas will result in the identification of certain patterns outlined in my research questions.

In the *Bandamanna saga* the time frame is rather limited. The plot of the saga happens over approximately forty years. The two main characters are Ófeigr and his son Oddr. The saga tells the story of Oddr from his youth until his embittered opponents start a major trial against him. He is sued because of his rising power and the enviable wealth he collected as a merchant. He tries to protect himself against the aggressors, but because of his lack of legal knowledge, he is on the way to losing the case, which might be followed by him losing his belongings (newly bought land, and his possessions received with the help of Fortuna and his own courage) or even becoming an outlaw. At this crucial moment his father, Ófeigr, interferes with his outstanding knowledge of Icelandic law and the art of using the law according to one's own interests. However, Ófeigr and Oddr have serious difficulties in getting along with each other at the beginning of the saga. Ófeigr simply refuses to give

anything to his son when he wanted to start his own life because Oddr was never any help to his father. At the end, Ófeigr brilliantly wins the case, marries his son to a high-ranking woman, and father and son make peace with each other.

The *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* is not a "family saga" in the classical sense. Although four generations are shown in the saga, the real central figure is just Egill, the talented, but rude, harsh, and aggressive poet. The story starts with Egill's grandfather Kveld-Úlfr, a powerful and berserk man, who withstands the kingly will of Harald Fairhair. His two sons, Skalla-Grímr and Þórólfr, follow two different paths. Þórólfr, contrary his father's wishes, joins the kings retinue, but according to Kveld Úlfr's prophecy he gets killed by the king's command. His father and brother, after avenging his death, move to Iceland to start a new life there; however, Kveld-Úlfr (an old man at that time) dies on the way. Skalla-Grímr settles and becomes an honorable and wealthy man, and it is said that he also inherited his father's supernatural talents, which together with a rough and dark look is characteristic of one side of the family. The other side is fair, subtle, but at the same heroic, one. Skalla-Grímr's two sons, Þórólfr and Egill, also represent these two lines in the family. Egill, the main hero in this research, who resembles his father, is extraordinary from his early childhood. He composes verses already at the age of three and kills his first man at twelve. Then, at a very young age, he joins his older brother on a trip to Norway. On this trip he finds himself comfortable. It turns out that he is an excellent fighter and a talented but biting and satirical poet. His main goal is to gain wealth, in which he succeeds to a great extent due to his unscrupulous nature. Besides his skills in fighting and poetry, he is also gifted with the knowledge of the runes, by which he also rescues a girl's life on one of his expeditions. His greatest enemy throughout the story is the Norwegian king, Eiríkr, and especially his wife, Gunnhildr. At one point Eiríkr manages to arrest

him, and at the suggestion of the queen his execution is imminent. However, his great friend, Arinbjörn, convinces the king to let him live if he composes a worthy poem for Eiríkr. This poem is the famous "Head Ransom." After his times abroad and his lucky escape from death he returns home and starts a more relaxed life in Iceland where he does not get into any trouble and becomes an honorable man like his ancestors. Already in Iceland, Egill composes his second memorable poem, "The Sona-Torrek" (The Son's Loss) on the occasion of two of his sons' deaths. However great hero he was, the end is bitter – his age becomes his greatest enemy. He loses all his strength and dignity and dies after composing three bitter but also expressive short poems.

Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða is not a traditional family saga which covers several generations. Its focus is on a fight between two persons, the hard and smart Hrafnkell and Sámr his aggressive but unwary opponent. The conflict starts, as usual, with a killing. Hrafnkell kills old Þórbjörn's son, and unlike his usual practice, he is willing to pay ransom for the boy. The vengeful father refuses this offer and at last finds his nephew, Sámr, as a supporter of his case. They find patrons for themselves against the powerful Hrafnkell, the Þóstarr sons from the West Fjords, and manage to outlaw Hrafnkell. However, Sámr in his arrogant superiority does not complete the exile process and releases the seemingly humiliated Hrafnkell. This false generosity is the reason for Sámr's fall. He did not follow the unwritten rules of the society (by leaving his enemy alive) and Hrafnkell manages to regain his strength and get his former territory back from Sámr. Sámr tries to fight back, but his former supporters (who had also forecast his fall) do not take sides with him, and so he can never attain the status of Hrafnkell, the real hero of the saga.

The *Droplaugarsona saga* is a shorter story about a family feud. The three main characters are Helgi, Grímr, and their mother, Droplaug. Helgi is a manful and

self-confident leader of his men. One of the cases he has to settle is the adultery of the wife of Þórsteinn. But his fate is to die from the hand of his opponent, Helgi Ásbjarnarson. Grímr, his brother, of course, avenges his death.

The *Laxdæla saga* is much longer and complex. The true focus point of the happenings is a love story between three actors. The first is Guðrún, the most beautiful and smartest woman who ever lived in Iceland; and two male rivals, foster brothers, Kjartan and Bolli. Kjartan loves Guðrún, but refuses to take her with him on his journey and asks her instead to wait for him for three years while he sails to Norway. The foster brothers travel together in great understanding, but they are captured in Norway by King Oláfr Tryggvasson. The king wants to Christianize Iceland and he does not allow Kjartan and some other Icelanders to leave the country until this mission succeeds. However, Bolli is allowed to return to home. When after a while Kjartan manages to get home, where he finds out that Guðrún married Bolli. Kjartan in his disappointment humiliates Bolli and Guðrún, which she will never forget, and she decides to have her husband kill Kjartan. Guðrún's brothers and Bolli at last find Kjartan and manage to kill him, but Bolli breaks after he has killed his foster brother. Guðrún's brothers are outlawed, but Bolli, after the intervention of Kjartan's father, his foster father, Óláfr, escapes this fate and only pays ransom. Kjartan's mother, Þórgerðr, the daughter of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, stirs her sons to avenge their brother. Finally Bolli gets killed, but the circle of the vengeance closes only when the slayer of Bolli dies by the hand of Bolli's posthumous son, Bolli. Guðrún stands behind this last killing, too, but reaching old age she enters a cloister and dies in great honor, admitting to her son before her death that her greatest love was Kjartan. For the present analysis, another extraordinary female character, Unnr,

plays the most important role, although she only has a small role in the saga. She is the great-grandmother of Kjartan's grandfather, Höskuldr Dalla-Kollsson.

The last saga I introduce here is the *Brennu-Njáls saga*. This is the longest and the best developed of the family sagas. In the center of the saga stands Njáll, a wise man with prophetic talents and a deep knowledge of the country's law, who has a bellicose wife, Bergþóra, several sons and foster sons, and a warrior friend, Gunnarr. He is held in great esteem, but sometimes still mocked because of his peculiarity that he has no beard. Gunnarr marries Hallgerðr, a woman famous for her beauty and her ill temper. She has already had two husbands; both of them were killed by her foster father (Þjóstólfr). Hallgerðr and Bergþóra become bitter enemies, and because of this the friendship of Njáll and Gunnarr are set for a trial – but the killings arranged by the two women cannot break the men's relationship. Njáll foresees that Gunnarr is in great trouble, and tells him that he can avoid certain death only by following his advice. According to the saga tradition such warnings are never heard and taken into account. Gunnarr kills two people from the same family (in this way he takes no notice of Njáll's advice) and gets outlawed. He almost leaves the country but, in perhaps the most famous scene of the saga, he looks back to his fields and decides to stay, which will lead to his death because of his vindictive enemies and wife. Hallgerðr takes revenge on Gunnarr for an insult by not helping him against the attackers. The saga then turns to Njáll's sons (Skarpheðinn, Grímr and Helgi) and their new friend from the Hebrides, Kári Sölmundarsson. Kári marries Helga, Njáll's daughter, and they will have a son, Þórðr, who will be later a foster son of Njáll. Despite their peace-loving father, the Njállssons become enemies of Þráinn, who has hidden Hrappr (one of the men who attacked and killed Gunnarr). A long passage of feud is taking place between the two sides, but when Þráinn's brother, Ketill, marries

Njáll's daughter, Þórgerdr, a truce is made between the parties. To strengthen this bond Njáll becomes the foster father of the (killed) Þráinn's son, Höskuldr. At this period (around the millennium), Christianity was introduced to Iceland (by agreement) and Njáll and his whole household become followers of the new faith. Höskuldr is Njáll's favorite; he finds him an excellent wife (Hildigunnr) and achieves what the Fifth Court has established for him. However, the shadows of the former killings and feuds do not let life go on in peace. One of Gunnarr's killers, Mörðr Valgarðsson, envies Höskuldr, and succeeds in having Höskuldr killed by the Njállssons, his own foster brothers. Flosi, the uncle of Höskuldr's wife, leads the accusers' side and at last he manages to attack Bergþórshváll, Njall's *gård*, where he, his wife, Bergþóra, and all their sons get killed. Before burning the house down Flosi feels inclined to let the old couple go, but both of them refuse. Njáll rejects this because of his age, since he would not be able to avenge his sons, and Bergþóra because of her dignity and her strong attachment to Njáll. Only Kári escapes and he tries to continue the feud. At the next *Alþing* the two hostile groups fight with each other after an unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation. Flosi's brother-in-law is killed, but as a sign that Christianity is taking root, Ljótr's father refuses to ask for ransom for his son. At last all the participants in the burning are outlawed and Kári tries to kill each of them one by one. Flosi, the leader of the "burners," makes a pilgrimage to Rome and after this he also reconciles with Kári, who after marrying Höskuldr's widow, starts a new life.

These saga summaries give some hints about the positions and roles in the society and about how it worked. They also describe the lives and social statuses of their protagonists, who will be the subjects of the discussion here. Before turning to

that part of the thesis, I will give a short overview of the functioning of the Icelandic society.

3 Society in Viking-Age Iceland

In order to understand the place of any characters, including the elderly, in the sagas, it is important to briefly introduce the Viking Age[27] society in Iceland. In what circumstances did the elderly population live? Answering this question allows a better understanding of the opportunities, status, and situation of this age group.

What is now called the Icelandic Free State had a complex and diverse society in the Viking age. The Free State itself lasted about two centuries after the Viking raids ceased; the end of this form of state came with the acknowledgement of Norwegian lordship by the leading clans.[28] The society consisted of several different social groups; it was built upon family ties, economic and political relations, and friendships. Besides these, commonly known and accepted laws and different but strictly determined rights of the diverse social groups held the Icelandic State together. However, Icelandic society was not all together egalitarian; wealth and physical superiority made clear distances and boundaries between the different persons, families, and clans.

The sagas give no real description of the society. Only through the named persons and the different situations can the system, and the place of individuals in it, be reconstructed. The layers of the society were slaves (*træl*), servants (*þjónn*), peasants (*bændr*) and territorial leaders (*góði*). The sagas mention all the members of the society, but not in a detail and, of course, in different ways and proportions.

[27] The Viking Age itself lasted from around 793 (the first Viking attack documented in detail) to 1066 (the battle of Stamford Bridge, where Harald II (harðráði) the Hard-ruler (1042-1066) lost his life during his campaign to get the throne of England).

[28] This happened in 1262 when, after several decades of bloody struggles between the leading clans of Iceland, the Norwegian king, Harald Haraldsson (1217-1262), got the pledge of the magnates to recognize the Norwegian king as their sovereign. Stefan Brink and Neil Price, ed., *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008), 572-573.

Besides, the pictures one gets from these descriptions are schematic presentations of the different groups in society. Slaves were a special and well separated group; they were persons without full rights. They were outside the borders of the society and there was no family or clan to protect them. They could be killed[29] or sold. Slaves were either born as slaves or they were taken to Iceland as prisoners, mainly from Celtic territories. Slaves could be freed, but they did not have the same rights as the originally free people. To lose one's freedom meant not only to lose "political" and social rights, but to lose one's honor, without which one was worth nothing in Iceland. Moreover, if a slave was freed by his or her owner he was not accepted as a full-right member of the society (in connection with inheritance and legal rights, for example), he or she was called manumitted (*leisingi* or *frjálsgjafi*), and even his or her children were marked with the cognomen "freed-man's-son." Neither the parents nor the children were accepted as equal to the originally free people.[30]

The peasants, who theoretically constituted the predominant majority of the population, did not form an even layer in society. Every one of them was closely bound to the land he (or she) owned, the so-called *óðal*-land, an inalienable ancestral land.[31] This land, and more closely the *gård* (farmstead), was the basis for life in Viking Age society. The *bóndi* had the right to choose their leaders, but not every *bonde* had the same rights and possibilities. There was a certain sum that had to be paid to become *þingfarakaup*, which meant that there was a census at the

[29] Only the owner could kill a slave without any serious consequences. If someone killed a slave of another man a fine had to be paid (the value of the deceased), but not a blood wit (although it was required in the Grágás, the Old Icelandic Law book). Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 103-107.
[30] Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society*, 119-134.
[31] The *óðal* land is not simply a piece of property. It was in a close relationship with the owner, who could be named after the land, for example. The *óðal* land was also a part of the family, the original owner's clan had the right of preemption.

assemblies.[32] This sum was paid to those farmers who actually accompanied their leaders to compensate them for their absence from work in the fields. Otherwise the farmer was "only" a *þingmaðr* (thingman) of a certain *goði,* who protected his rights if needed. The ordinary thing man could also join the *goði* at the assemblies, and they were often asked to be a part of the jury, moreover, they could act as *fylgðarmaðr* (a follower of their leader) and act as a decision-making crowd.[33] Not only the family, the father, mother, children and other relatives such as grandparents or cousins, but the servants and the slaves, too, belonged to the *gård*. This community was called *hjón* or *hjú* and the head of it was the (usually) father of the family.[34] He was responsible for all the people under his authority; he was the only one who could represent them in front of the law and he had to protect their interests.[35] The whole household was under the protection of the *bonde* (this type of protection was called *grið*).[36] To summarize the relationship between the people and the *gård* I will quote a dialogue from the *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* which clearly shows the approach of the Icelanders to the land and to the *gård*:

> Sam asked if he was a *godi.* He said that was far from the case.
> "Are you a farmer then?" said Sam.
> He said that he was not.
> Sam said, "What sort of person are you then?"[37]

[32] For every member of the house the *bonde* should own the value of a cow and an additional cow or horse. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *Saga og samfund. En indføring i oldislandsk litteratur* [Saga and Society: An Introduction to the Old Icelandic Literature] (Coppenhagen: Berlingske Forlag, 1977), 38.

[33] Sørensen, *Saga og samfund,* 38.

[34] Allthough he was the only one entitled to act publicly, the Icelandic (and also the Scandinavian) father was not a paterfamilias without reference to similarities in Roman tradition. He was not allowed to kill anyone of his family or servants without consequences (though theoretically he could do this to his slaves).

[35] Sørensen, *Saga og samfund*, 37-38.

[36] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Simon Teuschler, "Slektens rolle på Island og i Bern" [The Role of Kindred in Iceland and Bern], in *Det europeiske menneske. Individoppfatning fra middelalderen til i dag* [The European Human. The Conception of the Individual from the Middle Ages until Today], ed. Sverre Bagge (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1998), 113.

[37] Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða 268-269.

Sámur mælti: "Hvort ertu goðorðsmaður?"
Hann kvað það fjarri fara.
"Ertu þá bóndi?" sagði Sámur.

The title *góði* was an interesting formation in the Icelandic Free State. The *góðar*[38] were the leading men of the society, usually great landowners with power and influence. Every *bonde* had to be under the influence (or protection) of a *góði*, but their power was not territorial. Every *bonde* could choose to which *góði* he (or she) would belong;[39] the territory he or she(!) was responsible for was called a *góðorð*.[40]

The administrative units and events of the Icelandic State were the *þing* (things). The *góðorð* were divided into four quarters (*fjórðungar*) and every quarter had its own *fjórðungsþing* (assembly) or *várþing.* The *várþing* were held in the springtime, regional assemblies which every man of a góðorð had to attend. Among other territorial affairs the *góðar* chose men (usually every ninth one) who were to follow him to the *Alþing,* the yearly parliament of the Icelandic Free State held every summer.[41]

The *Alþing* was the main legislative and juridical event in Iceland. The laws were not written down for a long period (only from 1117 or 1118) and thus the interesting position of the *lögsögumaðr*, the law-speaker was established. A law-speaker had to cite one third of all the commonly known laws every year and helped to interpret them to the *lögretta* (the Law Council[42]) if necessary. This was a prestigious position, namely, chairman of the *Alþing*, but it (also) lacked real power and he was not any form of authority because his official powers lasted only during the annual assemblies. The law-speaker was elected from among the *bonder* for three

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Hann kvaðst eigi það vera.
Sámur mælti: "Hvað manna ertu þá?"
Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 14, 2011).

[38] Plural form of the word *góði*.

[39] Of course, the most reasonable choice was to join a *góði* living close by to be able to help each other.

[40] Knut Helle, ed., *The Cambridge History of Scandinavia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 216-218 (CHS, 2003).

[41] CHS, 2003, 214-216.

[42] Twelve *góðar* created the *lögretta.* (In case of the Eastern, Western and Southern Quarter three additional men were elected to reach the required number.)

years and they could fill this position for a longer time if everyone was satisfied, but it was not inheritable. During the different *things* (*Alþing*, spring- or quarter *things*) courts were also held. Cases of appeal were brought before the *fimmtardómr*, the Fifth Court, which operated during the *Alþing*. [43]

In Iceland the legislative system was well established, while (maybe because of the Free State form of governing) the executive power was missing. The winner of a suit had to fulfill the decision, whether it was a simple fine or the highest penalty, exile. Anyone who wanted a remedy, or simply that the law or doom should be fulfilled, had to rely on his (or her) own influence and power. The more people (and *þingfararkaup*) one *góði* had the more certain it was that the case would be solved in a favorable way. A good example of this is in the Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða:

> Thorgeir said, 'No man is a full outlaw as long as the *confiscation court* has not been held, and that has to take place at his home. It must be done fourteen days after *Weapon Taking*.' … 'You are a courageous man,' said Thorgeir, 'but I don't think my kinsman Thorkel means to leave you in the lurch. He means to help you until this business between you and Hrafnkel has come to an end, so that you can live in peace.'[44]

Another, no less important but more informal, grouping of *bonder* was the *hreppar*.[45] These were associations (with a minimum of twenty "*þing-bændr*"[46]) on territorial grounds which served as a kind of service association for the *bændr*. These were institutions for landowners to protect prices, fees, and to control manpower. The *hreppar* were also responsible for the poor and orphans. The intention was not to support everyone who lost his (or her) possessions for all time, but to give them a

[43] CHS, 2003, 214-215.
[44] *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, 272-273.
"Eigi er maðurinn alsekur, meðan eigi er háður féránsdómur, og hlýtur það að hans heimili að gera. Það skal vera fjórtán nóttum eftir vopnatak."… " 'Hraustur maður ertu,' segir Þorgeir, 'og þykir mér sem Þorkell frændi vilji eigi gera endamjótt við þig. Hann vill nú fylgja þér, þar til er úr slítur með ykkur Hrafnkeli, og megir þú þá sitja um kyrrt."
Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, chapter 12, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (accessed February 7, 2011).
[45] Singular form is *hreppr.*
[46] Of bonder who were able to go to the *þing.*

certain amount of the lost goods to make recovery possible.[47] The leaders of the *hreppar* were the so called *sóknarmenn* (five in every *hreppr*); each *hreppr* usually met three times a year.[48]

The role of friendship was also a determining factor in Viking Age Iceland. Friendship was, besides family alliances and marriage bonds, the most important relationship. However, the forms of friendship were not completely like of those we are used to today. Money had a great importance in friendship; with a certain amount of money one could assure the relationship with the other. Friendships between chieftains meant mostly political alliances. Friendship bound persons tightly together. A man could leave his *góði*, but not his friend; society would no longer accept him; his honor would be lost.[49]

The family, as mentioned above, was the basic unit in the society. The status of the family determined the individual's position in society. The luck or misfortune of the family followed the individual for his or her whole life. Opinions about the person were strongly bound to the family. The family members could rely on each other and the tie of revenge was also important. The family was the individual's first reserve force.[50] The family, in my opinion, was a kind of individual in society.[51] It acted in its own interests, inside the given social framework. In this context the individual was not that important as long as it concerned his or her personal needs. All the members of the family had their allotted places in the system.

The women had a double role in the family as well as in society. On the one hand they had certain rights and freedom in their deeds, but on the other hand they

[47] Sørensen, *Saga og samfund*, 43-44.
[48] Sigurðsson and Teuschler, *Slektens rolle på Island og i Bern*, 205-215 passim.
[49] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Friendship in the Icelandic Commonwealth," in *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland,* ed. Gisli Pálsson (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1992), 215.
[50] With the time this attitude changed. The friendships, the administrative units, and political alliances became better defined.
[51] This is a concept similar to what cultural anthropologists call a "corporate group."

had no political rights. They had, for example, fewer rights than men to act alone concerning legal issues without any male (relative) representative. However, in inheritance practices women did have a place (although only after their male relatives). Women could inherit from their fathers, brothers, husbands, and children. They received their inheritance in the form of a dowry, which belonged to them. In case of a divorce, the whole amount of property had to be returned to her. Women were responsible for their deeds, although there is evidence in the sagas that husbands were involved in legal proceedings if necessary.[52] Although women could inherit, possess land or own a *góði* title,[53] their real field was the *innan stokks* (infield) inside the *gård.* They were responsible for the household, and if the *bonde* was absent, for the farmland, too.[54]

The men had their tasks outside the house. They were responsible for the land and for the organization of the property. They, as mentioned before, were the sole representatives of the household in society. Physical strength was important for a man, but shrewdness and legal knowledge were also highly esteemed.

Children are often mentioned in the sagas. They were significant in connection with the family (the clan) and its future. Laws gave an early date for the coming-of-age of male children. They were counted as adults from their twelfth year; they were then responsible for their deeds (they could testify, for example). Girls were under the jurisdiction of their fathers or other adult male relatives until they married or their sixteenth (or maximum twentieth) year.[55]

[52] Women could be exiled as well as men, but if a convicted woman was pregnant, she could only be sent away after she had given birth. Sørensen, 1997, 39-40. Saga evidence shows that the husband was responsible for his wife's deeds (see for example *Brennu-Njáls saga*).
[53] In such case a male relative had to represent the woman in legal issues. Sigurðsson and Teuschler, *Slektens rolle på Island og i Bern*, 205-215 passim.
[54] Sørensen, *Saga og samfund,* 39-40.
[55] Else Mundal, *Borna til vikingane – forsømte eller elska?* [The Children of the Vikings – Neglected or Loved?] (Oslo: P2 Akademiet, Z, NRK Fakta, 2002), 144.

Perhaps the most interesting formation in Icelandic society was the fostering system. There was no completely parallel system in Europe. In medieval Europe patrician children went often to serve as pages at princely or royal courts. In these cases the host belonged to a higher class and the pages did not become members of the host family. The system in Iceland worked differently. Foster children became members of the foster-family. In this way the individual had another tie in the society, where, because of the absence of a central government, every extra connection was useful and necessary. Different types of fostering were practiced in Iceland: voluntary, home, and obligatory. Voluntary fostering was the most common: this meant that the future foster parent (or parents) could choose for themselves whether they wanted to take the responsibility or not. In most cases it was not a question – both families benefited from the connection. These relationships could act as peace pacts. The children acted as a kind of hostage between the two families.[56] In case of boys, the foster parent usually came from similar or lower strata of the society than the child.[57] In the case of a girl, a foster parent of higher status was the accustomed choice because the foster parents had a say in the dowry of the girl.[58] Higher status on the foster parents' side could increase the opportunities of a girl in the important process of marriage. Most commonly, boys had foster fathers (*fóstri*) and girls had foster mothers (*fóstra*).[59]

Fostering at home was bound to the same *gård* the child came from; in the case described above, foster children lived with their foster parents. The foster parent

[56] The best-known foster child was Hákon aðalsteinsfósrti (Haakon I the Good, 920-961) the son of Harald I Fairhair (850-933), who was fostered by the English King Athelstan (893-939).
[57] Else Mundal, "Forholdet mellom born og foreldre i det norrønne kjeldematerialet" [The Relationship Between Children and Parents in the Norrøn Resource Material], *Collegium Medievale* vol.? (1988): 15-17.
[58] Else Mundal, "Children, Parents and Society as Reflected in Old Norse Sources," *Nordica Bergensia* 27 (2002): 182-184.
[59] However, there is evidence in the sagas which shows exceptions. See *Brennu-Njáls saga* and *Harðar saga og Hólmverja*. Mundal, "Forholdet mellom born og foreldre i det norrønne kjeldematerialet," 22.

definitely came from a lower status then the parents of the child; they were usually slaves, *leisingi* or poor freemen from the household. In these cases, the foster parents received a better position within the *gård.* In these cases the family did not improve its contacts with other families. Why did this type of fostering exist after all? Did the family not receive any good offers from other families? Was this a kind of expression of parental love? Did the *bonde* reward one of his men in this way? Did the *bonde* and family strengthen the *gård* with the children staying at home? In my opinion all these possibilities are likely.

Obligatory fostering happened in two situations. Either the parents were too poor to be able raise their children or they died before the child reached the age of adulthood. The laws determined in both cases who should take responsibility for the children; most commonly relatives got the chance.[60]

This was the society where elderly people had to get along. How did they fit in? Could they fit in? What was their role in this culture? What was the overall opinion about them, and what were their personal thoughts about their age? In the following I will present some possible answers to these questions.

[60] Mundal, "Forholdet mellom born og foreldre i det norrønne kjeldematerialet," 14-15.

4 Heroes for Nothing? Glory to Gloom.

The concrete questions I will examine about the elderly people are the following: How are they described? What was old people's understanding about their age? How were they treated by the society? And two less detailed but in the same way important sub-questions: Was there any difference between the way men and women were treated? And finally, how should old age come to a decent ending, or in other words: what was a good-death?

4.1 How are they described?

According to the short summary presented above, the *Bandamanna saga* is more a splendid source for legal historians than a subject for social and cultural research. Ófeigr was already old when he became an active voice in the saga, which was not unique.[61] His case is interesting because the main actions of his role were when he was elderly, his physical description is detailed, and the way he handles his situation and tasks is rather peculiar.

Ófeigr is an old man – no doubt of that. His description starts at the beginning with a short sketch of his abilities and financial situation. He is described as outstanding wise man and a good advisor; however, he was not wealthy at all. The next important descriptive part already concerns old age.[62] At the assembly, Oddr is

[61] Ármann Jakobson states: "There are numerous old men in the Sagas of Icelanders," Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders," *The Journal of English and German Philology*, 104 (2005): 297. They are like Ófeigr, and many of them are described well and in detail as he is. For example, Þórólfr Lame-foot in *Eyrbyggja saga* or Unnr in *Laxdæla saga* who (and some others) I will discuss later on. For an analysis of the case of Þórólfr Lame-foot in *Eyrbyggja saga* see: Ibidem, 297-325, passim.

[62] In this, he is not alone; see Ármann Jakobsson's analysis of Þórólfr Lame-foot, who also became interesting in his old age.

on his way to damaging his court case because of his imperfect knowledge of the law, when his estranged father appears:

> He was an elderly man in a black sleeved cape; it was threadbare and had only one sleeve, hanging down the back. He had a metal-pointed staff in his hand. He wore his hood low over his face, peering sharply out from under it. He walked with a stoop, jabbing his stick down for support. It was old Ofeig, his father.[63]

The description is really visual. The fact that his clothes are worn may be a sign of his difficult financial circumstances, but it could also be a sign of his age. The clothes fit to the wearer, they are worn and old, they had served their time just as old Ófeigr had. The stick is a fairly obvious attribute of elderly people, from old times until now. It shows weakness, the inability of the owner to move freely in full possession of his physical abilities. Besides, a stick makes it rather hard to hold a nobler tool, an ax or a sword, in the hand. This means that the bearer is no longer a warrior, no longer a physically fully capable person. The way he wears his hood is also informative. Ófeigr is, in a way, hiding himself with the hood, hiding his physical weakness. The bent back, the awkward pose, is also an attribute of old age. The elderly are no longer strong and because they lack strength and power in a way they have lost their right to walk with the head held up high.[64] The last important element of this description is the way in which Ófeigr looks at others. He looks up at them, from a lower, defenseless position. In a way his perspective is like a child's. The same way as a child looks up at (taller) adults, so Ófeigr (or elderly people in general) look up at the younger powerful men who still have rights, influence, and physical

[63] The Saga of the Confederates, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 5 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 291. "Sá er við aldur. Hann var í svartri ermakápu og var hún komin að sliti. Ein var ermur á kápunni og horfði sú á bak aftur. Hann hafði í hendi staf og brodd í, hafði síða hettuna og rak undan skyggnur, stappaði niður stafnum og fór heldur bjúgur. Þar var kominn Ófeigur karl, faðir hans." *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 5, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 21, 2011).

[64] In Ófeigr's case this kind of poise will have an important role to which I will come back later.

strength.[65] This perspective is also a way to intensify the physical deformity of the older body, of Ófeigr's body, in the story.

In *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* the ageing of the different actors is often mentioned, but rather casually. In Kveld-Úlfr's (Egill's grandfather's) case it is only a statement (the first time) and maybe a way to describe the plain fact that there were already three grown men in the family: "r was now well stricken in years, and his sons were grown men."[66] Regarding Kveld-Úlfr, contradictory pieces of information appear at different points in the saga. On the one hand, he is often called an old man, but, on the other hand, the remarks on his appearance testify to the physical strength which he, as an unusual and somewhat supernatural person,[67] keeps until his son's (Þórólfr) death.[68] The description of Egill's physical weakness in his saga is powerful: "Egill Skalla-Grímsson now grew old, and in his old age became heavy in movement, and dull both in hearing and sight; he became also stiff in the legs."[69] But his

[65] Shulamit Shahar made this comparison between the rights and positions of the children and elderly people in medieval societies: "Analogy between children and old people persisted for a long time in western culture." Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 5.

[66] Egil's Saga, tr. W. C. Green (1893), chapter 1, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 11, 2011). "Kveld-Úlfr var þá mjök á efra aldri, en synir hans voru rosknir." Egils saga Skallagrímssonar, chapter 1, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (last accessed May 11, 2011). In this saga Haraldr Fairhair (Hárfagri, c. 852-933) is also in the same situation, not only concerning his age, but also his retirement. When Haraldr felt that he was no longer in a position to rule the country he gave the land to his son Eiríkr, and settled in the southeastern region. This also happened in the case of Egil; he ran the farm while his father was still alive and he was the decision maker, the *bonde*. "Skallagrim was now old and weak with age. Egil took the management of the property and care of the house." Ibidem, chapter 61. "Skalla-Grímur gerðist þá gamall og hrumur af elli; tók Egill þá til fjárforráða og bús varðveislu." Ibidem, chapter 58.

[67] For instance, he was capable of changing his form.

[68] "He had then the management of all the farms belonging to his father and himself and of all the produce, though Kveldulf was yet a hale and strong man." Egil's Saga, chapter 20, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 11, 2011). "Hann hafði þá forráð öll fyrir búi þeirra feðga og tilöflun alla, en þó var Kveld-Úlfur hress maður og vel fær.." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 20, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (last accessed May 11, 2011).

[69] Egil's Saga, chapter 90, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 11, 2011). "Egill Skalla-Grímsson varð maður gamall, en í elli hans gerðist hann þungfær, og glapnaði honum bæði heyrn og sýn; hann gerðist og fótstirður." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 88, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (last accessed May 11, 2011). To this context must I add Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova's statement, that "during his advanced age, Egill spends more time at home." Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 295. This is an important element in the ageing process of a character and can be applied to

humiliation, the complete melting of his former glory, is not this simple and plain description. In addition, it is written that Egill stumbles; he is in the way of the working people of the *gård* (even the women); his only wish is to sit in the sun or beside the fire of the house. All the classical marks of advanced age are listed: legs, sight, and hearing. Several other sagas list these weaknesses, but usually not together. In *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún loses her eyesight and Hrut's legs become weak.[70]

In Önundr's case[71] his bad state meant that he had to hand over the family property to his son: "And when Aunund grew old and his sight was dim, then he gave up the housekeeping to Steinar his son."[72] Here the father's incapacity was the factor that decided the handover of the property. The transmission of the estates, a definite sign of age, weakness, and the inability to act as a powerful, useful (or even relevant) member of society, is, as in Egill's case, connected with the death of his wife. After this he moved to his favorite (step-) daughter's house.

Hindrance in bodily movement is also a typical sign of advanced age and is often connected with illness. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson emphasizes that disability (in any sense) and getting the label "old" are closely connected in the sagas.[73] In *Laxdæla saga*, Melkorka's[74] nurse had to use a walking stick because of her old age and

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some examples in my chosen sagas, like Unnr, Bersi the Dueller or Egill. However, Ófeigr is not among the recluses.

[70] In Hrut's case: "I'm not about to make the journey to Kambsnes on my slow legs,…" The Saga of the People of Laxardal, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson, vol. 5 (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 53. "Heldur mun eg annars á leita en fara á Kambsnes því að mér er fótur þungur." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 37, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 18, 2011).

[71] Önundr is the neighbor of Egil in his later years, and their sons have a minor quarrel with each other, which the two fathers (both in their old age!) settle peacefully.

[72] Egil's Saga, chapter 85, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 11, 2011). "Og er Önundur gerðist gamall og sýndur lítt, þá seldi hann af hendi bú; tók þá við Steinar, sonur hans." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 83, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (last accessed May 11, 2011).

[73] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old,' Ageism and Taking Care of the Elderly in Iceland c. 900-1300," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 232.

[74] Melkorka is the mother of Óláfr (one of the main characters in the saga) and the daughter of Myrkjartan, the king of the Irish.

illness. Hrapp[75] and Bersi the Dueller, in the same saga, were unable to move from their beds because of their illness (probably brought on by age) or simply just because of age. As Bersi phrases nicely in his poem:

> Both of us lie,
> flat on our backs,
> Halldor and I
> helpless and frail.
> Old age does this to me, but youth to you,
> you've hope of better,
> but I, none at all.[76]

The fact that his situation prompts him to compose a poem is not only due to his rather unpleasant physical state, but perhaps also to the embarrassing and also ridiculous comparison between him and the absolutely helpless baby. In fact, this harsh verse is a tool to keep his minimal dignity.[77] The act of composing itself elevated the poet above the average; Egill's poems can also be examples of this. The well-described figure of Unnr in *Laxdæla saga* also belongs in this category of the physically weak, which I will discuss below.

Another re-occurring characteristic is the increased amount of sleep old people need. Both Unnr in *Laxdæla saga* and Njáll in *Brennu-Njáls saga* are said to need more sleep than the younger generation. Skarpheðinn, Njáll's son, even notices this: "'Father is going early to bed,' he said. 'And that is only natural, for he is an old

[75] "As he grew older, Hrapp's strength waned until he was confined to his bed, but his malicious nature remained the same." The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 19. "Hrappur hafði skaplyndi hið sama en orkan þvarr því að elli sótti á hendur honum svo að hann lagðist í rekkju af." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 17, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

[76] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 38.
Liggjum báðir
í lamasessi
Halldór og ek,
höfum engin þrek.
Veldur elli mér
en æska þér.
Þess batnar þér
en þeygi mér.
Laxdæla saga, chapter 28, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011). The connection between the children and elderly is also emphasized here. See Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 5.

[77] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 316.

man.'"[78] This observation was noted when Njáll, while letting his house burn, retreated to his bed to die there. Nevertheless, with the gentle humor of the sagas, he is noting a rather everyday happening.

The often-mentioned weakness of the elderly is also a decisive part of *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. In some cases, this is not just physical feebleness, but also a weakness of the soul. In *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* Kveld-Úlfr gets into this position: "Kveldulf heard of his son Thorolf's death, and so deeply grieved was he at the tidings that he took to his bed from sorrow and age."[79] In *Brennu-Njáls saga* Njáll grieves for Höskuldr, his foster-son, so deeply that he says that he would rather have two of his own sons die instead and he could never speak about this event unmoved. This type of weakness appears in several other sagas, too. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre's essay raises an interesting point in this matter. She states that (older) fathers grieved more for their older sons than for their younger children because they counted on their support in their old age.[80]

The term "old" is Ófeigr's attribute throughout the saga. Whoever speaks with him calls him old, and according his other attribute, wise. For example, Egill, one of his victims in the campaign to save his son from humiliation and being cheated out of his property, calls him: "old carl as thou art" or "sly old carl and wise art thou,"[81] but he is not the only one to get this label in the sagas. Plenty of elderly men get this

[78] Njal's Saga, tr. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 268. "Snemma fer faðir vor í rekkju og er það sem von er. Hann er maður gamall." *Brennu-Njals saga*, chapter 129, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).
[79] Egil's Saga, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 11, 2011). "Kveld-Úlfur spurði fall Þórólfs, sonar síns; varð hann hryggur við þessi tíðindi, svo að hann lagðist í rekkju af harmi og elli." *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.on (last accessed May 14, 2011).
[80] Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, "The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons," in *Medieval Family Roles. A Book of Essays*, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 181-183. This was a clear admission of the dependence and weakness of elderly fathers.
[81] The Saga of the Confederates, tr. John Coles (1882, English v. 2.), chapter 8, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga.en2 (last accessed April 22, 2011). "og ertu góður karl og vitur" or "ertu slægur karl" *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 8, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 22, 2011).

appellation as, for example Kjallak the Old or Veleif the Old in *Laxdæla saga* and Sjolf the Old, Hildir the Old or Hlenni the Old in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. However, in a different context, Skarphedin also calls Njáll old: "Do you hear that? He is not so innocent, the old man."[82] This is more like a statement or maybe a kind of teasing of his father. In this way, in one sentence, he identifies his father as old. In contrast, he elevates him; despite being old, and as such considered weaker and less perspicacious, he is actually wise. In *Hrafnkjels saga Freysgoða* also, Þorbjörn is often called simply "old man"[83] as if that explains everything about his status in his own milieu. This is also a kind of distance keeping by the author, to position the person in question without giving a qualitative statement. It is a useful tool, however, to clarify the position of the speaker to show the distance between him, not inferior but a physically reduced actor, and the named, fully capable person.

The descriptions of the old age in *Hrafnkjels saga Freysgoða* are also useful in my context. There are, and not only in this saga, expressions that show that the term "old age" (*elli* or *gamall*) was a kind border in the measuring of life time in Icelandic society.[84] What this "old age" meant and when it started might remain questionable, but nonetheless it is an important phrase in the saga texts, especially in terms like: "where he lived until his old age,"[85] which evidently means: until his retirement. But whether this really meant old age or was only a sign of free-will retirement is hard to decide. When old age started, it was up to the *bonde* to decide, both in cases of the

[82] Njal's Saga, 202. "Heyrið þér hvað hann karlinn segir faðir vor. Eigi er hann grómlaus." *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 92, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed may 19, 2011).
[83] See for example "The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi," *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 1, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 270. "gömlum manni" *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 10, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 15, 2011).
[84] *Gamall* is the term for biologically old, but for those who are still capable or for work, "retired" persons. The more frequently used term is *elli*, meaning forced to retire. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old, " 231-232.
[85] See for example "The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi" 262, 281. "og bjó þar til elli" Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, chapter 1 and 20, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 15, 2011).

servants and for him or herself.[86] The rhetorical meaning might be as simple as: "for a long time onwards" until he was unable to manage his farm (or simply gave the power to his heir).[87] Besides, if using the term *gamall,* this phrase is perhaps a measure of a good life, namely, the good and full life which lasts until old age (whatever it actually meant). A good example of this is the framing in *Droplaugarsona saga*: "Thorvald did not live to be an old man and died."[88] This means that he did not live a complete life; the natural end, old age, is missing. A more decisive use of this term in this context is in *Brennu-Njáls saga*: "Hallgerd does not let our servants die of old age."[89] However, I would not drop the simplest possibility, that this could also mean a relatively high number of years, although there are no actual numeric data concerning age. Nonetheless the question is there: How old did this "old" actually mean? This is hard to answer, since there is rather scarce saga evidence that gives exact numbers. From the sparse direct references (in the texts selected for this study) one is in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* where the narrator (or writer) gives Egill's age: "In the later days of Hacon the Great Egil Skallagrim's son was in his ninth decade of years."[90] Or another case in *Laxdæla saga* where it is said: "Snorri then died, aged three score years and seven."[91] Gilian R. Overing states that around 900 only five percent of the

[86] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old," 233.
[87] See various examples in several sagas, like Droplaugs in "The Saga of Droplaug's Sons, 364 or" Helgi Bjolan in "The Saga of the People of Laxardal," 3.
[88] The Saga of Droplaug's Sons, *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 4, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavík: Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), 358. "Þorvaldur varð eigi gamall maður og andaðist…" *Droplaugarsona saga*, chapter 2, http://www.sagadb.org/droplaugarsona_saga (last accessed May 17, 2011).
[89] Njal's Saga, 106. "Ekki lætur Hallgerður verða ellidauða húskarla vora." *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 38, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 18, 2011).
[90] Egil's Saga, chapter 90, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 15, 2011). "Það var á dögum Hákonar hins ríka öndverðum, þá var Egill Skalla-Grímsson á níunda tugi, og var hann þá hress maður fyrir annars sakar en sjónleysis." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Chapter 88, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 15, 2011), which meant seventy seven years according to A. C. Muriel's English translation from 1880 http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga.en (last accessed May 18, 2011).
[91] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 118. "Síðan andaðist Snorri. Hann hafði þá sjö vetur hins sjöunda tigar." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 78, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 18, 2011). My observation is in accordance with Ármann Jakobsson's statement: "it is extremely hard to

population was over sixty-five years old. Her perception is that the level of respect, the preservation of dignity, and social status determined when and how a person was counted as old, which I also discovered in my research.[92] This resembles Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's statement: "age was defined according to its function."[93]

A strong emotional outlook is connected to Þorbjörn in Hrafnkjels saga Freysgoða. After that he and Sámr had tried everything at the Alþing to get support for their case (to sue and convict Hrafnkell), Þorbjörn is ready to give up the whole case and leave the place. Sámr, shocked by this idea, replies that he will not leave until he has tried every possible way to win their trial. After this part the saga continues: "When this speech ended, Þorbjörn was so moved that he burst into tears."94 What can this line mean? One possibility is that this crying episode is there only to show Þorbjörn's exaggerated feelings, in this case because of Hrafnkell's gross insult and the possible pressure to withdraw the case. This, as other strong feelings in the sagas, is shown through outer reactions (because of the saga genre's nature to lack descriptions of inner states), like paleness or redness in the face or, or as in this very case, even crying. Another explanation may be that the clear expression of weakness (an attribute connected mostly to women) is ascribed to him because of his age. Older people could sink in the social hierarchy to the level of children, as I already mentioned.95 Þorbjörn in this case was dependent on Sámr as a child would be on his or her parents, thus he was allowed to show this kind of weakness. Society may even have assumed that an old man was no longer capable of sustaining stress

calculate with any accuracy how long medieval Icelanders lived." Ármann Jakobsson, "The Partiarch: Myth and Reality," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 271.

[92] Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29:2 (1999): 215-216

[93] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old," 231.

[94] The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi, 268. "Þá fær Þorbirni svo mjög, að hann grætur." *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 9, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 15, 2011).

[95] Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 5.

and to hide his feelings, which in a younger man's case was not simply remarkable but usually to be admired.96

[96] As Pat Thane writes that in medieval Europe appearances and capacities defined the individual's status and state in the society. There were no set rules and roles that the elderly people had to follow – as I will also point out in the following sections. Pat Thane, "Social Histories of Age and Aging," 98. In "The Saga of the People of Laxardal" the same connection of the old and children occurs in spite of the weakness of both age groups. The former is not yet capable and the latter is already incapable of acting like a real man of full right and possibility."Your brothers are inexperienced and your father is an old man." The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 58. "Bræður þínir eru óráðnir en faðir þinn gamall" *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 40, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed may 19, 2011).

4.2 How did Old People Understand their Age Personally?

The next expression relevant to my argument is Ófeigr's own statement to his son Oddr: "It is not like a chieftain to fool me thus, an old man…"[97] This may mean that it was usual to mock old people and it is only Oddr's status that should keep him back from a common attitude towards Ófeigr and people like him. In the position of a great and powerful man it is not worthy, dignified, or necessary to tease anyone from a lower status. This clearly shows that common usage was probably different from this! People generally might make it felt with the elderly or weaker persons that (at least) they were in a lower position than average. In this one statement Ófeigr admits Oddr's honor and admits his own decreased position, but at the same time protects his own dignity and rebukes his son.[98]

However, it is interesting that he himself is the first to mention his age, while Oddr's only fault is that he does not tell his father the whole situation he is involved in. This is one of the main characteristics of Ófeigr, the determining element of my research, namely, that he uses his age to reach his goals. On one occasion he also makes a verse out of this:

> An old stay-at-home,
> finds satisfaction
> in talking chiefly
> With intelligent men.
> You won't refuse
> to confer with me,
> because worthy men

[97] The Saga of the Confederates, tr. John Coles, (place?, 1882) vol. 2., chapter 5, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga.en2 (last accessed April 21, 2011). "Eigi er það höfðinglegt að ginna mig gamlan." *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 5, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 21, 2011).

[98] This mocking, or negative approach towards the old persons was not a unique phenomenon, but rather a commonplace. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming ʻOld," 234. The idea, the mocking of the old people and the perception of it by the younger generations, I will discuss this in more detail below.

call you wise.[99]

He uses his age consciously. With the frequent mention of it he acknowledges that every other actor in the saga considers him as someone of a lower status. They think that his mental and intellectual capacity is less than their own.[100] This careless attitude results in their deception – they must act according to Ófeigr's conception. Here he acts out his old age on two different levels: on the first he is capable of fooling the others with his presumed weakness; on the second he is an example of the "wise old man" character. Interestingly, the two main conceptions: the "wise old man" and the "redundant old fool," appear in one and the same saga and even in the figure of one and the same person! On the one hand, everyone takes Ófeigr as a harmless old man, who is (as he also states) happy to sit in the company of strong, powerful, and young men and who has already lost his mental acuity. On the other hand, however, it turns out that everyone was mistaken and his mental capacity elevates him, in spite of his physical weakness, to the level of the "young."[101] This was possibly a way of social control, to give an admirable old man, and parallel to this to urge the population to do the same.[102] Ófeigr verbalized the disadvantages of looking down on the elderly, because one can never know who is old in abilities or

[99] The Saga of the Confederates, 296.
Það er nú gömlum
gleði heimdraga
að spjalla helst
við spaka drengi.
Muntu eigi mér
máls um synja
því að virðar þig
vitran kalla.
Bandamanna saga, chapter 8, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 22, 2011).
[100] Ófeigr uses here the common thought of medieval Europe: psychological and moral degeneration of the old people. Ármann Jakobson, "The Specter of Old Age," 303.
[101] Another example of this: "You won't refuse me a chat; it's an old man's chief pleasure to pass the time by talking with people like you." The Saga of the Confederates, 296. "Er það nú helst gaman karls að tala við þess háttar menn og dvelja svo af stundir." *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 8, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 22, 2011). His attitude goes against Jakobsson's two examples of characters who "can only be active by being destructive." (He means Egil and Þórarinn the Viking) Ármann Jakobson, "The Specter of Old Age," 317.
[102] In a "you can never know how smart that guy actually is" way, thus giving a positive example.

just in years, which also indicates that a certain look was related to this period of life. Ófeigr also blames the younger generation for the same faults (the loss of sight and wits) that are connected to old people – the loss or lack of the talent of good judgment makes for weaker decisions, it makes one old.

> It's ill for men
> to endure old age;
> it snatches from them
> sight and sense…[103]

The most remarkable element, though, is Ófeigr's reaction to his success: "Then Ofeig went away and back to Egill's booth, walking neither slowly nor uncertainly, nor yet with a stoop."[104] This fantastic transformation was the result of one simple fact: he played the active role in an event. He was the one who determined the course of events and in this way he regained his old strength. In several sagas[105] is it shown that besides physical strength and wealth, intellectual acuity was also a prized and admired attribute in the Viking Age.[106] The two states, the young and active and the old and passive, have two different forms of appearance: the straight and strong and the bent and defenseless. Thus, when Ófeigr starts to finish his scheming, his whole appearance changes and shows an active man: "But Ofeig went into the ring, looked around him and put back the hood of his cape. He straightened

[103] The Saga of the Confederates, 303.
Illt er ýtum
elli að bíða,
tekr hún seggjum frá
sýn og visku...
Bandamanna saga, chapter 10, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed May 15, 2011). This verse in fact is a perfect example of irony and scorn.
[104] The Saga of the Confederates, 301. "…hann er hrumur að fótunum og eigi svo laustækur í málunum sem hann er lasmeyr í göngunni." *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 9, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 22, 2011).
[105] For example Njals saga or The Saga of Ref the Sly.
[106] The intellect is always esteemed high. A Viking hero does not necessarily need any such ability, but if he has some it is acknowledged and remembered. Haraldr the Hard Ruler, for example, won many of his battles as a mercenary in the Byzantine army by delusion or fraud – and everybody admired his abilities. For more to this topic see Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 146-191, passim.

up and stroked his arms. Then his eyes sparkled as he spoke…"[107] At the same moment he becomes the arbiter of the happenings, he immediately regains his strength, his stature.

A similar event happens in this saga as in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* Egill, after having admitted the loss of his powers,[108] acts as a completely capable and active man when he has to settle the disagreement between his (not even loved) son and the son of the neighboring *bonde* (Önundr's son, mentioned above). Egill, after arriving at the Alþing in full armor and splendor with quite a number of followers handles the case easily and peacefully in accord with Önundr. Like Ófeigr, both of them regain their strength as they get into the position of acting as men with full rights; and so said Önundr: "Never shall that shame be ours, that we lacked the manhood to reconcile them."[109] This shows that the "lack of manhood" means that, as already mentioned, they are no longer able to handle things. No matter if those things are dependent on the physical or intellectual strength.[110] Hrut belongs in this category in *Laxdæla saga*: "Hrut was over eighty when he killed Eldgrim, and gained a great deal of respect as a result of the deed."[111] Afterwards his hostile nephew felt ashamed that an old man did what he was supposed to do. Nevertheless, the deed returned Hrut

[107] The Saga of the Confederates, 302. "En Ófeigur gengur í hringinn, litast um og lyftir kápuhettinum, strýkur handlegginaog stendur heldur keikari. Hann titrar augunum og talaði síðan." *Bandamanna saga*, chapter 10, http://www.sagadb.org/bandamanna_saga (last accessed April 22, 2011).
[108] He gave up his farm and moved to his step-daughter's. This in fact was not that common in Iceland. Principally old people (both farmers and servants) were looked after in their own household. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old," 239
[109] Egil's Saga, chapter 86, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 18, 2011). "…skal okkur og aldri þá skömm henda að vera þeir vanskörungar að sætta þá eigi." *Egil saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 84, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 18, 2011).
[110] Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre states the same in her essay about the medieval Icelandic father and son relationship. She writes that "Family honor cannot be upheld if old men are forced to sit by passively while their children bring ridicule on the lineages." However, here it is stated that the old men did not want to lose their positions, but were forced by the younger generation. This is, of course in many cases true, but this could only happen with a decline in the parents' strength. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, "The Emotional Universe", 178-179.
[111] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 53. "Hrútur var þá áttræður er hann drap Eldgrím og þótti hann mikið hafa vaxið af þessu verki." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 37, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 18, 2011).

to his former place in society. These examples demonstrate that action, taking a decisive role, is what constituted a full-right person in the Viking Age.[112] When someone was no longer able to take part, either physically or mentally, in society according to the norms of his or her social status and gender, then that person could be called old. This made him or her less important. This point is supported by various examples in the sagas I have selected.

Egill, however, is not using his age as consciously as Ófeigr. In his case old age is something that embarrasses him in his daily life and deprives him of his former glorious, admired, and respected position. The only element that is uniquely interesting in his case is that Egill sees his new position with a kind of dignity, humor, sarcasm, and even with a somewhat frivolous attitude, namely, he mocks his own impotence!

> Old haltered horse I waver,
> Bald-head I weakly fall:
> Hollow my failing leg-bones,
> The fount of hearing dry.[113]

However, his two other old-age verses are not this witty. In his second poem he complains about a servant woman who bundled him off away from the fireplace. Here he complains that his new position is much lower than his previous one where

[112] Gillian R. Overing has drawn the same conclusion: Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question: Aging, Community, and Gender in Medieval Iceland," 212, 214. This statement is also Jón Viðar Sigurðsson's conclusion in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old," 242.

[113] Egil's Saga, chapter 90, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 12, 2011).
Vals hefk váfur helsis;
váfallr em ek skalla;
blautr erum bergis fótar
borr, en hlust es þorrin
Egil saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 88, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 12, 2011). For a detailed analysis of Egil's age and the unusual verse about his impotence see: Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga* [Literary background to Egil's saga] (Oslo: Universitetsforlagets trykningssentral, 1971), 192-196. Or Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man," in *Youth and Age in the Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 300. Here she explains his wording to express his decreasing masculinity and respect among women.

he was accompanying kings and was admired by many. In the third and last verse he talks about coldness and loneliness as the last steps before death.

> Lonely I lie,
> And think it long,
> Carle worn with eld
> From kings' courts exiled.
> Feet twain have I,
> Frosty and cold,
> Bedfellows needing
> Blaze of fire.[114]

In these short poems his role has already changed. As Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova summarizes in her conclusion, Egill now uses his young and glorious days to deepen the contrast between his old and younger self. While in his fruitful years he required "appreciation from the audience; the old Egill pleads for mercy."[115] According to Bjarni Einarsson these three poems are the descriptions of an ageing self and the everyday fights of an old man. Here he speaks openly and outright about his state.[116]

Elsewhere in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, the elderly people show explicit attitudes towards their position. Egill's grandfather, Kveldúlfr, displays a typical perception regarding his age and his role: "Kveldulf answered that he was an old man, not fit for war or to be out in warships. 'I will now,' said he, 'sit at home and leave

[114] Egil's Saga, chapter 90, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 22, 2011).
Langt þykki mér,
ligg einn saman,
karl afgamall,
á konungs vörnum;
eigum ekkjur
allkaldar tvær,
en þær konur
þurfu blossa.
Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 88, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 22, 2011).
[115] Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man," 304.
[116] Bjarni Einarsson, *Litterære forudsætninger for Egils saga*, 193, 197

serving kings.'"[117] Old persons, according to this statement, were no longer able to act as the young; their ability to serve as soldiers or to perform their jobs and tasks in the proper way was already weakened. The other interpretation is that now, after a hard-working life, the elderly deserve to do what and how they will, to live the rest of their lives in dignity.[118] Ketill Flat-nose's meaning is the same in the *Laxdæla saga*: "I do not intend to spend my old age in that fishing camp."[119]

Kveldúlfr's poem after hearing of the death of his beloved son, Þórólfr, pertains to this perception:

> Thorolf in northern isle
> (O cruel Norns!) is dead:
> Too soon the Thunder-god
> Hath ta'en my warrior son.
> Thor's heavy wrestler, age,
> Holds my weak limbs from fray:
> Though keen my spirit spurs,
> No speedy vengeance mine.[120]

This verse not only shows that he is grieving for his son, but three other important elements. The first is the already mentioned weakness of old age, the inability to act as freely, fast, and hard as he used to do. Secondly, he states that it is only the body that has weakened and not the spirit. Only the physical parameters are

[117]Egil's Saga, chapter 5, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011). "Kveld-Úlfur svarar, sagði, að hann var þá gamall, svo að hann var þá ekki til fær að vera úti á herskipum. 'Mun eg nú heima sitja og láta af að þjóna konungum.'" *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).

[118] Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question," 216.

[119] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 2. "Í þá veiðistöð kem eg aldregi á gamals aldri." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 2, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 17, 2011). By the term "fishing camp" he meant Iceland.

[120] Egil's Saga, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011).
Nú frák norðr í eyju,
norn erum grimm, til snimma
Þundr kaus þremja skyndi,
Þórólf und lok fóru;
létumk þung at þingi
Þórs fangvina at ganga,
skjótt munat hefnt, þótt hvettimk
hugr, malm-Gnáar brugðit.
Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).

missing, in the soul (spirit) the elderly are as young as the others – which make this status much harder. The third is the general opinion that parents should not outlive their children, as Kveldúlfr straightforwardly phrases at the beginning of the saga: "…it were in the course of nature from our ages that thou shouldst overlive me, but I think it will be otherwise."[121] Njáll in *Brennu-Njáls saga* worries in the same way when he foresees his own and his family's death.[122] The first problem of Kveldúlfr is also the problem of Njáll in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. When Flosi is about to burn the Njállssons, he allows the women, children, and servants to leave the house. He offers Njáll to do the same, but Njáll refuses: "'I have no wish to go outside,' said Njáll, 'for I am an old man now and ill-equipped to avenge my sons; and I do not want to live in shame.'"[123] Honor is easily lost and the elderly have lost it many times as a result of their weakness. Njáll, aware of his declining strength, chooses the only possible way to remain a brave and admirable man.

Yet, to act according to the course of nature (the weakened position and strength of elderly people) as one member of this age group does not mean that the respect shown towards them should also decrease (at least not in the family and beyond a certain grade). Egill phrased this wish in the fanciest way:

> Him who from me inherits
> I hold no worthy heir.
> A son deceives me living,
> Deceit I call his deed.
> Well might he, wave-horse-rider,
> Wait but awhile, till me
> Sea-skimming shipmen cover

[121] Egil's Saga, chapter 19, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011). "… og væri það að sköpuðu fyrir aldurs sakar, að þú lifðir lengur okkar, en annan veg ætla eg að verði." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 19, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).
[122] See Njal's Saga, 233 and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 111, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga.
[123] Njal's Saga, 267. "Eigi vil eg út ganga því eg er maður gamall og er eg lítt til búinn að hefna sona minna en eg vil eigi lifa við skömm." *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 129, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011). See also Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age" 305.

With shroud of piled stones.[124]

In one place in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* Þorbjörn presents his interesting (and ever after typical) statement: "The reason you young people never amount to anything is that you keep making such a large fuss about everything."[125] This one sentence is a real treasure chest for interpretation. The first level is the fact that in the good old days every one was much more capable, trustworthy, and obedient than in the present times. From this statement it is clear that the younger generation is weakened, as in Hesiod's theory about the different ages.[126] He himself is certainly on the good side; he is old, so he certainly belongs to the "betters" and he is eager to do the right thing while Sámr (a representative of the next generation) hesitates. With his statement he clearly separates himself from Sámr, young and incapable, as if he would say it is better to be old than useless. This statement indicates an interesting contrast to Icelandic society's idea of useless and good-for-nothing elderly persons and points out their own ideas of their place and abilities, which shows a strong dichotomy, as many statements do in this context.

[124] Egil's Saga, chapter 84, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011).
Áttak erfinytja,
arfa mér til þarfan,
mik hefr sonr of svikvinn,
svik telk í því, kvikvan;
vel mátti þess vatna
viggríðandi bíða,
es hafskíða hlæði
hljótendr of mik grjóti.
Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 82, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011). Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova's results have to be mentioned in this context. She analyzed Egil's poems as a child and as an old man, and concluded that while young and strong Egil often called himself a seafarer warrior, while the "shore-loafer" others were minor to him. In this late poem of his, he already calls himself one of these "shore loafers." So also his poems mirror his new state of life and the bitterness in the poem is his meaning of this fact. Yelena Sesselja Helgadóttir Yershova, "Egill Skalla-Grímsson: A Viking Poet as a Child and an Old Man", 297.

[125] The Saga of Harfnkel Frey's Godi, 267. "Því verður engi uppreist yðar ungra manna, að yður vex allt í augu." *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 7, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 16, 2011).

[126] The same idea formed in Þórgerðr's mind, the daughter of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, as I will discuss below.

What I wanted to show in this short discussion is what old people wanted the most: to keep their formerly earned prestige and their dignity. In Overing's article there is an interesting comment on this prestige, namely, that this followed a "one-sex cultural model" for both male and female, and that the Icelandic system was "based to an extraordinary extent on winnable and losable attributes."[127] This statement fits my details. With old age former glory melted like ice in the sun, only the actual state counted. This also concerned women, as I will discuss below.

[127] Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question," 212.

4.3 How Did Society Treat Old People?

According to Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "respect for the 'old' was almost nonexistent, and attitudes towards them were negative."[128] In accordance with his statement, Gillian R. Overing writes (quoting Corinne Nydegger's study) that: "old people command 'little community respect in the absence of wealth and prestige.'"[129] This is not completely true for Ófeigr (he, as I have already described, used his marginal situation as a tool to reach his goal), but generally it describes the situation of the elderly generation. However Ófeigr himself uses this stereotype consciously(!) for his own purposes with success, which in a way strengthens the fact of the widespread character of this prejudices. Other, rather powerful old persons (both men and women like Njáll and Unnr) can be found in saga literature. However, both Njáll and Unnr may be literary pictures of real persons, the products of a certain "mythmaking" process, as Ármann Jakobsson states. [130]

Otherwise it is fairly hard to determine the real situation of old people in Viking Age Iceland since, as is often mentioned, the sagas mostly deal with the wealthy and prestigious, so in this manner any analysis covers only one layer of the society.[131] Nevertheless, several old servants (and slaves) are mentioned in different sagas, which reflects the fact that that the senior generation was present also among lower-class people. In addition to this, many of these elderly servants, who should have been marginalized according to the previous statement, play quite decisive roles

[128] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Becoming 'Old,' 237.
[129] Corinne N Nydegger, "Family Ties of the Aged in Cross-Cultural Perspective," *The Gerontologist* 23, No. 1 (1983), 27, quoted by Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question," 217.
[130] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Partiarch: Myth and Reality," 266-271. However, as Jakobsson formulates in his conclusion, the old people of great caliber could have been examples of saga actors like Unnr and Njáll. Ibidem, 283.
[131] Ibidem, 271.

in a number of sagas.[132] In addition to this, one other factor supports my investigation. Philadelphia Ricketts writes in her article (in a somewhat different context): "The last we hear of these women is during a significant, saga-worthy event in which they were involved."[133] The same problems can occur when dealing with the elderly people in general. If they were not involved in an important situation, they are not mentioned as they are no longer the decision-making heads of the families (or the wife of the *bændr* or strong and influential widows), and because of this it is difficult to get to the center point of the happenings. One only hears about the "interesting" old people, and knows "nothing" about how many uninteresting elderly person there were.

To lose the previous level of regard was something that everyone tried to avoid, no matter whether it concerned him- or herself or anybody else in the family. The main reason for this was that in Viking society no one could exist alone, in a social vacuum. Another crucial factor was the property, the relation to the land (typically one's farm), or to have some ties to the social organization. Without those a person was suspicious or simply just not worth reckoning with. Even minor servants and slaves were necessarily bound to some family or household.[134] It is not surprising, therefore, that Sámr, in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* asks Thorkel, after he tells his name and some information about his family, to specify himself a bit more in the social context:

> Sam asked if he was a *godi*. He said that was far from the case.
> "Are you a farmer then?" said Sam.
> He said that he was not.

[132] See, for example, Sæunn the foster-mother of Bergþóra, Njáll's wife, in Brennu-Njáls saga or Melkorka's old nurse in *Laxdela saga*.
[133] Philadelphia Ricketts, "'Spoiling them Rotten?': Grandmothers and Familial Identity in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland," in *Youth and age in Medieval North*, ed. Shannon Lewis-Simpson (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 170; concerning men generally, see Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, "The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons," in Medieval Family Roles. A Book of Essays, ed. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 185.
[134] In a society where the *óðal*-land (a hereditary, family-bound land) was one of the foundations of the social system this is easy to understand. For further analysis see: Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, 83, 270-271.

Sam said, "What sort of person are you then?"[135]

The judgment of others was the most important thing, while it was not only the person him- or herself who was measured by one's deeds, but the whole family, often through several generations. Especially, as Jorgensen Itnyre writes in her essay: "References to filial pride in the sagas suggest that sons prefer strong, independent fathers who are capable of protecting family interests."[136] This may be the reason why Sölvi mentions his father's heroic fight against King Harald Fairhair. "My father thought it victory to die a king with honor rather than become in his old age another king's subject."[137] But what is more important in my context is the fact that in Sölvi's opinion an old man should keep, should be allowed to keep, his lifelong-earned dignity in his last years. This was a sign of respect for elderly people, not to deprive them of their deserved serenity.

Old age, with its expected weakness is sometimes a tool in the saga narrators' (writers') hands. It is a way to show how extraordinary one person is in the saga. If someone in his or her old age does something that is typical of youth, or further if this person even exceeds the average youngsters or middle-aged companions, it is one of the easiest ways to emphasize the special status of the person, that one man or woman could exceed not only his or her friends and enemies, but Nature herself(!), to fulfill every one's secret wish. And what is more admirable than this? Speaking of old age is

[135] The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi, 268-269.
Sámur mælti: "Hvort ertu goðorðsmaður?"
Hann kvað það fjarri fara.
"Ertu þá bóndi?" sagði Sámur.
Hann kvaðst eigi það vera.
Sámur mælti: "Hvað manna ertu þá?"
Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, chapter 9, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 14, 2011).
[136] Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, "The Emotional Universe of Medieval Icelandic Fathers and Sons," 186.
[137] Egil's Saga, chapter 3, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011). "Það þótti föður mínum vegur að deyja í konungdómi með sæmd heldur en gerast undirmaður annars konungs á gamals aldri." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 3, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).

a chance to show the audience that the character is remarkable (mostly not only in old age, but in his or her childhood, too).[138] "Plenty of strong men there were at that time in the neighborhood, but not one of strength to match with *Skalla-Grímr*. He was now somewhat stricken in years."[139] However, the best example of an extraordinary man is Egill. He was a "wonder boy" in his childhood; he composed his first verse at the age of three and killed his first "enemy" at seven. In his old age, although his miserable state is marked with care, he manages to settle the quarrel between his and his old neighbor's son simply by his wit. Besides, though already blind, he manages to hide his treasures in an unknown place (and kill the two accompanying servants).[140]

What was the main problem with the elderly people in this society? Not the ageing as a fact, of course, but the danger that these people could no longer contribute to the economy of the farmstead and would become a burden on limited resources. [141] A telling example of the value of activity in this society is in the case of Kveldúlfr:

> Kveldulf heard of his son Thorolf's death, and so deeply grieved was he at the tidings that he took to his bed from sorrow and age. Skallagrim came often to him, and talked with him; he bade him cheer up. 'Anything,' (he said) 'was more fitting than to become worthless and lie bedridden;'[142]

[138] In such (though quite unique) cases as Þórólfr Lame-foot in the *Eyrbyggja saga*, for example, the peculiarity of the actor is that he starts to be interesting in his later years (and especially after his death). His former life is not that important. For a detailed analysis see: Ármann Jakobson, "The Specter of Old Age,", 297-325.

[139] Egil's Saga, chapter 40, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 14, 2011). "Var þar í sveit gott til sterkra manna í þann tíma, en þó hafði engi afl við Skalla-Grím; hann gerðist þá heldur hniginn að aldri." *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 40, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).

[140] See Egil's Saga, passim.

[141] In several cases elderly people were among those who could serve as affordable losses for the society (together with the small children, the sick, and the poor). For a brief analysis see: Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question," 211-225.

[142] Egil's Saga, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en last accessed May 14, 2011).
Kveld-Úlfur spurði fall Þórólfs, sonar síns; varð hann hryggur við þessi tíðindi, svo að hann lagðist í rekkju af harmi og elli. Skalla-Grímur kom oft til hans og taldi fyrir honum, bað hann hressa sig, sagði, að allt var annað athæfilegra en það að auvirðast og leggjast í kör.
Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 24, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 14, 2011).

I have already demonstrated how Ófeigr used his age to reach his goal and the possibility that the saga narrators (writers) used this state as a rhetorical, confirmatory tool. However there is a third possibility, too. In *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* Þorbjörn's age is used by a friend to soften Þorkell's brother, Þorgeirr, to help in the legal case of Sámr and Þorbjörn. His age is a tool to get Þorgeirr's attention and reach his conscience. "Have the old man go into the booth first, and along the floor. He looks rather decrepit to me, both in terms of sight and age."[143] Here the "old man" image appears again as an epic epithet. After this statement comes the physical description of an elderly person, the usually mentioned bad sight and complete weakening of the body just because of age. However, in this case Þorkell uses this fact not as a negative attribute, but rather as a matter of fact, which he later turns to their benefit. The second command to Þorbjörn is to act as old persons used to do in his (and the saga listeners' or readers') imagination: "you should stumble badly."[144] After this (when Þorbjörn, following the order, goes into the booth and jerks the foot of Þorkell's brother) he is called "old man" again. The reason for this might be different from the previous cases (to show his decreased authority, to make a simple statement); it is rather a method to ease the anger and righteous indignation of Þorgeirr (the brother). In this way the term "old man" has a dual role; on the one hand, it is a simple "nickname" for Þorbjörn. On the other hand, it may be a deliberate word choice. He tries to mitigate the rudeness of the deed (namely, to stumble on the injured toe) by the fact that it was made by an old man, who is not, or not fully, responsible for his actions. In this way he or the compiler(s) of the saga identify themselves with the idea of the reduced abilities and responsibilities of elderly people. Old age here serves as

[143] The Saga of Harfnkel Frey's Godi, 270. "Gangi sá hinn gamli maður fyrir og svo innar eftir búðinni. Mér sýnist hann mjög hrymdur bæði að sýn og elli." *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 9, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 16, 2011).
[144] Ibidem. "…kemur að húðfatinu…" Ibidem.

an excuse: Þorgeirr should not feel indignant at Þorbjörn: it is simply not worth it and not elegant.

However, the most important element of this saga is said by a servant of Hrafnkell. It clearly shows a negative attitude towards old people and the importance of dignity, which can be easily lost with age, with the decrease of physical, mental, and spiritual powers.

> It is true what they said in the old days that "the older you get, the wetter you become." The respect a man receives early in his life isn't worth much if he loses it through dishonor and hasn't got the self-confidence to go off and rescue his rights. And it's a particularly big surprise in those men who have been made out to be courageous.[145]

In the statement of the servant woman there are numerous important elements. Any glory and respect a man could earn during his lifetime could be lost in a single moment. Though in old age the decrease of the dignity was accepted, total neglect of the values of the society was not acceptable.

Old age was a hindrance not only in connection with physical and intellectual strength, but in a more delicate matter: marriage. The Icelandic Law Codex, the *Grágás,* has a paragraph that a man over eighty years cannot marry without the permission of his heirs.[146]The reason is obvious – there was no need for new heirs claiming the property. Of course, the loss or decline of "manpower" (as Egill so tellingly says in his poem) also did not give good odds on the wedding market. An old man had many disadvantages. He could be unfertile, so why to have a young wife for nothing? He might be weak and sick, so he could be dependent (both economically and politically) on his children, which certainly would not be agreeable for any

[145] Ibidem, 277.
Satt er flest það, er fornkveðið er, að svo ergist hver sem eldist. Verður sú lítil virðing, sem snemma leggst á, ef maður lætur síðan sjálfur af með ósóma og hefir eigi traust til að reka þess réttar nokkurt sinni, og eru slík mikil undur um þann mann, sem hraustur hefir verið.
Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða, chapter 17, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 16, 2011).
[146] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming ʻOld,' 231.

woman (or her family). Of course, wealth could help make the bridegroom more attractive in many cases. This is admitted in *Laxdæla saga*: "Thorstein was by then very old and infirm, and it was for his wealth that Thordis had been given in marriage."[147] However, the saga is generous to Þorsteinn because in the continuation he is featured as a capable man. Could this mean disagreement with the marriage? That old men should not have young wives (even, as in this case, not for money)? This might be one interpretation, although in the saga it turns out that Þórdís is cheating on her husband with Björn, the neighbor.[148] This story, however, concludes in opinions about the older generation mentioned above. For example Björn (the debaucher) is warned that: "I would prefer, Bjorn that you left off your visits to Thordis; there is no honor for you in provoking an old man."[149] In this recommendation are two important details. The first is that at least the relatives took care of each other, even though Þórdís was related to Helgi Droplaugarsson, one of the main characters in the saga. The other is that for an adult and fully capable man, the mocking of an older (and therefore less important man in the society) is not an acceptable deed.[150] They were not in the same "weight class." This is the same

[147] The Saga of Droplaugs Sons, 363. "Hann var þá hrymdur mjög og var hún til fjár gefin. Þorsteinn var þó vel að sér." *Droplaugarsona saga*, chapter 6, http://www.sagadb.org/droplaugarsona_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

[148] This phenomenon (young wife with old husband) is mentioned in Ármann Jakobsson's article, too. Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of 'Old Age," 304. Did the sagas act as a kind of moral control in the Icelandic society? More than likely they did – these were the collections of the morally accepted and disapproved deeds and behaviors, collections of exemplary figures. Of course, in comparison with the French *sociétés joyeuses (*fool-societies) or as they called themselves: the Abbeys of Misrule, the sagas were not that direct tools as these organizations of young (and at the beginning) unmarried men in France, but more subtle literary ones. Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 97-123.

[149] The Saga of Droplaugs Sons, 363. "Það vildi eg Björn að þú létir af komum til Þórdísar og er þér fremd engi að skaprauna gömlum manni…" *Droplaugarsona saga*, chapter 6, http://www.sagadb.org/droplaugarsona_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

[150] This opinion, that insulting old people is not tolerable, nice (or worthwhile) is also present in Brennu-Njáls saga. Flosi mocks Skarp-Hedin that his father, Njáll, is beardless. The answer is the following: "'It is wrong to mock him in his old age,' said Skarp-Hedin, 'and no real man has ever done that before.'" Njal's Saga, 255. "Slíkt er illa mælt að sneiða honum afgömlum er engi hefir áður til orðið dugandi maður." *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 123, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

principal that Ófeigr mentions (and uses) in his operation to win the legal case which I already mentioned above. What follows this event is also typical for Icelandic society's treatment of the elderly persons. Helgi takes the case instead of old Þorsteinn. The reason is quite clear – he is no longer able to defend his dignity, the very opinion that society had of elderly people, which was among the most important duties a man had.[151] In a later section of the saga, this picture is completed with a further statement: "Eid was an old man when this occurred and no action was taken against the outlaw and many people criticized Thorkel Eyolfsson for not acting in this cause."[152] I have already mentioned old men who were no longer able to fulfill their duties as men (to protect their and their families' rights). The new element in this statement is that in such cases the younger generations should act in the name of the elderly. In the same way, accepting the decrease of power in the older generation was natural, even expected. The same episode happens in the *Brennu-Njáls saga* when Unnr asks Gunnarr to help her get her dowry back from her ex-husband. "'Hrut relied on force rather than law,' said Unn. 'My father was an old man then, and he was persuaded not to try to fight it out.'"[153] Elderly people were weaker not only in serious cases, like the protection of their own and their families' dignity, but in everyday life, too. In another example from *Laxdæla saga*: "He was a robust and popular man who farmed with his father-in-law Thorstein, now an elderly man and much in need of help."[154] Of course, the opposite possibility, that old people fought back or had the

[151] This appears in Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre's article, where she shows that the father's failure of courage shameful for his sons. Cathy Jorgensen Itnyre, "The Emotional Universe", 189-190.
[152] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 88. "Eiður var þá mjög gamlaður er þetta var tíðinda. Varð af því að þessu ger engi reki. Mjög lögðu menn til orðs Þorkatli Eyjólfssyni er hann rak eigi þessa réttar." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 57, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).
[153] Njal's Saga, 75. Meir þreytti Hrútur það með kappi en með lögum en faðir minn var gamall og þótti mönnum því það ráð að þeir þreyttu það ekki með sér. *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 21, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).
[154] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 9. Hann var hraustur og vinsæll og var með Þorsteini mági sínum því að Þorsteinn var þá hniginn og þurfti umsýslu þeirra mjög. Laxdæla saga, chapter 10,

will to do it, occurs in the sagas. Such an event, however, is always marked with admiration and a hint of surprise. "This old fellow still dares to face the others."[155]

In one case, the fact that someone is old is in no way a disadvantage; the only condition in which help is needed is proper wealth and the lack of an heir; this was fosterage. As I already described in the introductory chapter, fosterage was an important element in the social connections in Icelandic society. The foster child (if fostered by equal or higher status people) became a member of the foster family. Inheriting from the foster parents' side was an existing possibility. This is emphasized by Höskuldr in *Laxdæla saga*: "Thord is an elderly man and has no children. All his wealth will go to Olaf;"[156] In this connection old age was something useful in the eyes of the younger generation – there was no long waiting time for profit.[157]

Although old age (or the older generation) was often interpreted as negative, the good old times in some contexts were understood as positive. The epoch of the parents, grandparents or forefathers was something admirable, although its witnesses were often burdens on society or, at least, weaker than their former glory. As Þórgerðr, the daughter of Egill Skalla-Grímsson, formulates in *Laxdæla saga*: "Never would your grandfather Egill have acted like this…"[158]

http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011). This "uselessness" is a main point in Gillian R. Overing's article, "A Body in Question," 216.

[155] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 100. "Enn skal þessi hinn gamli þora að sjá í mót vopnum..." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 64, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 20, 2011).

[156] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 18. "Er Þórður gamall maður og barnlaus og ætla eg Ólafi allt fé eftir hans dag" *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 16, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

[157] This certainly did not mean that old people could not foster anyone. A good example of this is Njáll, who had several foster children, and Bersi. But in case of a lack of heirs the prestige of an elderly person (who would probably not have an heir) could fall heavily.

[158] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 84. "…og eigi mundi svo gera Egill móðurfaðir yðvar…" *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 53, , http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

4.3.1 Was there any difference in the way men and women were treated?

The physical descriptions of elderly men and women are quite similar. However, the women are often presented negatively, unless prestigious women (from an important family) were the featured actors in the saga. Elderly women are often marginalized, as Ármann Jakobsson mentions in his article. A character like Unnr in the *Laxdæla saga* is an extraordinary phenomenon (which, in my opinion, strengthens the poor image of the others) and their weight in the society is almost nothing. However, as Jakobsson states, they can be in a better position where they can more easily handle their unimportance.[159] The number of the old women may be less than their male counterparts because they were less likely to be actors in a real "saga-worthy" moment.[160] In the sagas selected here there is only one well developed old female character, Unnr, and some minor actors like Guðrún and Melkorka, the old nurse in *Laxdæla saga*, Þórdís in the *Droplaugarsona saga*, and Sæunn in *Brennu-Njáls saga*.

Guðrún, late in her life, is not the most detailed actor in *Laxdæla saga*. There are only two mentions of her, one is speaking about the increased years of her life, another mentioning her loss of sight, which is something that the male counterparts usually get as a comment on their ages. What she adds to the picture is more a new possible role for females in the sagas, the role of the Christian, pious woman: Guðrún is clearly pictured as a Christian woman, and she is said to enter a cloister. This is a sign of Christian influence in the saga. Because of this deed she is regarded as the most noble woman in Iceland, although at the beginning of the saga it was still Unnr, without any Christian overtones. This might mean that both virtues were admirable,

[159] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 307-308.
[160] Philadelphia Ricketts, "Spoiling them Rotten?" 170, 190.

the dignity and strength and the pious behavior, at the time of description (composition).

Melkorka's nurse receives a far longer passage. Her description contains the fact that she is bedridden (a condition often connected to old age) and that she uses a walking stick. However, what follows is much more interesting. Right after she hears the news that the son of her long-lost nursling has arrived she is most touched and the possibility of meeting her (through her son) gives her the power to walk without her stick and "enjoy health for the rest of that winter."[161] This latter is in my opinion the same phenomenon that the men experience when they handle a case (before the court, in connection with their families' interests and so on) but in the female version it applies to matters of the inner family or maybe this is also connected to the *innan stokks* obligation of women. Of course, it must be not forgotten that she is "only" a nurse, and not a more powerful woman with greater wealth and responsibility. In this way it is more usual that she is connected only with the emotional feelings of a mother. However, the fact that she can meet with someone connected to her former position shows the importance of this position. That is also acknowledged by the fact that she is immediately sent to Óláfr as if she had the right to see him. The next passage where she is mentioned is quite telling:

> Olaf received her with open arms, set her upon his lap and told her that her former charge was living in comfort in Iceland. Then Olaf handed her the belt and knife, which the old woman recognized at once and tears of joy came to her eyes.[162]

[161] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 29. "Var kerling hress þann vetur allan." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 21, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 20, 2011).
[162] Ibidem.
Ólafur tók við henni báðum höndum og setti kerlingu á kné sér og sagði að fóstra hennar sat í góðum kostum á Íslandi. Þá seldi Ólafur henni hnífinn og beltið og kenndi kerling gripina og varð grátfegin, kvað það bæði vera að sonur Melkorku var skörulegur "enda á hann til þess varið.
Ibidem.

The first detail is that she was seated in his lap – just like a child would have been. This is the often-mentioned connection between helpless elderly people and also the helpless children.[163] The second important element is the crying. This clear sign of weakness is connected several times to elderly people, both men and women.

Sæunn in *Brennu-Njáls saga* depicts another understanding of elderly women in the Icelandic society. She is a representative of the "witch" type of elderly woman or, more properly, those who have second-sight. This attribute often gave a negative connotation to elderly women.[164] She is also mocked and the form of address to her is also rather pejorative.

> There was an old woman at Berthorsknoll called Sæunn. She knew a lot about many things, and had second sight. She was very old by this time, and the Njalssons called her senile because she talked much; but what she predicted often came true.[165]

This same idea emerges in *Droplaugarsona saga* where a certain Þórdís occurs who is described as: "both ugly and swarthy."[166] After she was presented in the saga, because one man hit her with a snowball, she curses Helgi and his men. Helgi Droplaugarsson, of course, understands the significance of the willful offence towards a helpless(?) old woman and afterwards the power of her curse. In this case, however, the powers of old women are against the hero. So, in one word, to meet an old carlin

[163] See Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 5.
[164] Gillian R. Overing, "A Body in Question," 221. However Jón Viðar Sigurðsson states that the people who had magical powers were not always old. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Becoming 'Old," 236.
[165] Njal's Saga, 259.
"Kerling var sú að Bergþórshvoli er Sæunn hét. Hún var fróð að mörgu og framsýn en þá var hún gömul mjög og kölluðu Njálssynir hana gamalæra er hún mælti margt en þó gekk það flest eftir."
Njals saga, chapter 124, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 20, 2011).
In George W. DaSent's English translation from 1861 instead of old women, he uses the word "carlin," meaning besides old woman also witch, which is much closer to the original wording (with a more intense negative connotation). And, in fact, Skarpheðinn also calls his mother, Bergþóra, this way, which is a rather ambiguous wording. "The carline, our mother, thinks this fine sport," The Story of Burnt Njal, tr. George W. DaSent, 1861, chapter 44. "Gaman þykir kerlingunni að, móður vorri, að erta oss." *Njals Saga*, chapter 44, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed, May 20, 2011).
[166] The Saga of Droplaugs Sons, 368. "Hún var gömul, bæði ljót og svört." *Droplaugarsona saga*, chapter 10, http://www.sagadb.org/droplaugarsona_saga (last accessed May 20, 2011).

was usually bad, except if one "owned" her oneself, as Njáll did and her predictions were to help the household.

The strongest woman in my study is Unnr. Her age is well described and the model she shows is also emblematic and exemplary – both for women and men. After she had a long and eventful life and after earning a great fortune she became old. Old age was tightening its grip on Unnr. She was not up and about until noon and retired to bed early in the evening. No one was allowed to consult her from the time she went to bed in the evening until she was dressed the next day. She replied angrily if anyone asked after her health.[167]

It is important that she wanted to keep her dignity and she was also admired for this, which could also mean that this was not the average attitude. The fact that she did not like questions about her age means, in my opinion that she (and maybe every one) cared about ageing as a natural and everyday phenomenon. She also settles her offspring's future by arranging her grandson's marriage and the question of his inheritance (which, as I already mentioned, was one element of a person's good death). This is connected to one important detail. Óláfr pledged to her that if he married (and probably got the control over their large property): "the only wife I shall take will be the one who will rob you of neither your property nor your authority."[168] This is quite a generous offer from Óláfr and an acknowledgement of her virtues even in her old age, when the new *bonde* and his wife would be in charge of the property and everyone else would be under his authority (in the *innan stokks* area her authority).

[167] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 6.
"Elli sótti þá fast að Unni svo að hún reis ekki upp fyrir miðjan dag en hún lagðist snemma niður. Engum manni leyfði hún að sækja ráð að sér þess á milli er hún fór að sofa á kveldið og hins er hún var klædd. Reiðulega svarar hún ef nokkur spurði að mætti hennar."
Laxdæla saga, chapter 7, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 20, 2011).
[168] Ibidem. "En þeirrar einnar konu ætla eg að fá að sú ræni þig hvorki fé né ráðum." Ibidem.

4.3.2 The good death

In connection with elderly people the good death was an important question, and in this case both the descriptions, the meanings, of the old persons and the opinion of the younger generation are the same. A crucial factor was that both men and women had the same good death code. The most important thing was to die with honor. This was significant in the judgment of both the family and the deceased, in the close and distant future. In the *Brennu-Njáls saga* Njáll died with dignity; he did not use the humiliating possibility of escape.[169] The process of his death was noble, as Skarpheðinn formulates: "My father must be dead now, and not a groan or a cough has been heard from him."[170] It is important that the same could be said about Bergþóra, his wife, as she also refused to leave the house (or more correctly, Njáll) or shouted while dying. Another important element was to behave oneself, not bother the environment with the pains and troubles which occur in this period. Ti was best when someone could hold his or her form until their dying day, and then die sitting. In my opinion this meant that the person kept his or her attitude, was not lying down or hunched, but faced the coming event awake and prepared. "As he entered the room, Unnr was sitting upright among the pillows, dead. … Everyone was impressed at how well Unnr had kept her dignity to her dying day."[171] Skalla-Grímr also died a good death after he settled the business that was important to him, namely, to hide his silver.

> Skallagrim came home about midnight, and then went to his place and lay down in his clothes. But in the morning, when it was light and

[169] As I already mentioned, he did not like the possibility of leaving his son's death unavenged.
[170] Njal's Saga, 268. "Nú mun faðir minn dauður vera og hefir hvorki heyrt til hans styn né hósta," *Brennu-Njáls saga*, chapter 129, http://www.sagadb.org/brennu-njals_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).
[171] The Saga of the People of Laxardal, 6. "Og er hann kom í stofuna sat Unnur upp við hægindin. Hún var þá önduð." … "Þótti mönnum mikils um vert hversu Unnur hafði haldið virðingu sinni til dauðadags." *Laxdæla saga*, chapter 7, http://www.sagadb.org/laxdaela_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

> people were dressed, there sat Skallagrim forward on the seat's edge, already dead, and so stiff that they could not straighten him nor move him, though they tried all they could.[172]

The expectation that the elderly people should make their testaments in time so as not to cause unnecessary quarreling among the heirs was also expected of old people. This is often mentioned in the sagas. Unnr, Höskuldr Dala-Kolsson, and Snorri the Godi in *Laxdæla saga* dispose of their properties. Some made this distribution or transmission of their property earlier, some just before their deaths, which could cause serious problems between the generations. The whole point, besides the "dignity-factor," was to leave with the least destruction.[173]

The effect Christianity had on the perception of old age may arise in connection with the good death. This field, however, is worth a complete and detailed analysis, so in the following I will only mention some ideas on the basis of this research, the interesting morsels I happened upon in my own research.

In my opinion, the greatest difference between the pre- and post-Christian era is that before Christianization life before death was important. People wanted to achieve fame in their lives to be remembered after they died. Even those who came back as ghosts (as Þórólfr Lame-foot in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*[174]) are close connected to their earthly lives and not worried about the afterlife in the Christian heaven or hell. Most of the figures in the sagas elected here relate to the "non-caring" group. Neither they nor the narrator feel it important to mention a Christian understanding or behavior towards death.

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[172] Egil's Saga, chapter 61, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga.en (last accessed May 19, 2011).
"Skalla-Grímur kom heim um miðnættisskeið og gekk þá til rúms síns og lagðist niður í klæðum sínum; en um morguninn, er lýsti og menn klæddust, þá sat Skalla-Grímur fram á stokk og var þá andaður og svo stirður, að menn fengu hvergi rétt hann né hafið, og var alls við leitað." *Egil's saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 59, http://www.sagadb.org/egils_saga (last accessed May 19, 2011).

[173] That not every old person thought this way, see Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of 'Old Age,'" 299-325.

[174] Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age," 297-325.

In the sagas here, the real change after the Christianization was not in the attitude towards elderly persons,[175] but more towards old age itself and the perception of the afterlife. What one might read between the lines is that this should be the period to become pious and think about the coming new experience.

[175] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has the same result according to *Íslendingasögur* and samtiðarsögur. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Becoming "Old," 229.

Conclusion

My main goal has been to describe the perception and self-perception of old age in Viking Age Iceland with the help of six elected sagas. Research on various life stages, including old age, has gained in significance since the 1970s and since then numerous studies have been published over a broad chronological and geographical range. My discussion highlights only a few questions in this field of study, restricted in space and time; nevertheless, the three main and two minor issues addressed here also bear significance in a broader framework. The description of elderly people, their own and their surroundings' perception of their status and possibilities, the conditions of a "good death," and the status of old women are all contributing factors.

The descriptions of elderly people in the sagas follow a straightforward pattern. One of the main lines here is to show the physical symptoms of this life stage, like weakness, especially in the limbs; the loss of sight; or the complete helplessness (even impotence) including being bedridden. The second group of symptoms includes the inner changes in their mental strength and courage. These elements return in the self-descriptions as well as in the views of outsiders. Old people themselves admit these states and faults, but always with a bitter overtone. They complain about their loss of power (both inner and physical) all the more since they do not, and cannot, ignore their reduced status in society in general and in their own family in particular.

The same perception can be seen in their close and distant environments alike. The following generation is aware of their status and state and usually does not expect too much from their fathers' (and mothers') generation, except that they behave according to positive examples. These models are easy to follow: do not get in the way if you are not capable of working and are not able to take part in everyday

activities. Dispense your wealth in time and in a reasonable way. Die with dignity. This rather short summary, however, is only one (although frequent) perception of elderly people's duties. The sagas also report acknowledged, even admired, old persons, although a proper and careful source critique, in this and in every context of the sagas, is critical. However, according to my results their better social position is always connected to their better physical, intellectual, and financial status. An elderly man or woman was held in high esteem when he or she was able to handle everyday matters (and extraordinary situations) with the same care and energy as the younger generation. In this case they regained or retained their former status (which was the main wish of this age group), and on top of that, they were admired for their extraordinary abilities. This admiration shows perhaps most clearly that this way of behaving was evidently not expected from the elderly, and confirms that the general attitude towards "ordinary" old persons was either mocking or condescending, sometimes patronizing.

Elderly women are also represented in the sagas, although not as many times as their male counterparts (who themselves were not a large group in the sagas' happenings). The expected negative portrayals are not in the majority in my selected sagas. For instance, Unnr is an extraordinary and even manly figure who lives and dies according to the highest standards, while Gúðrún receives adoration because of her later life in the cloister. Sæunn and Thordis represent the two sides (the positive and the negative) of one perception, the old women with supernatural powers (comparable to witches in other cultures). And the last figure, the nurse, is a typical personification of a weak, protected old woman.

The issue of the impact of Christianity on the description, self-perception and status of the aged (which I just touched on in my research) is a complex question in

the scholarship and it suggests possible further research on this topic. Old age was and must have been an important phase in the lives of the medieval Icelanders (irrespective of how many old people there actually were). The fact that several poems touch on the topic is telling – only the positively or negatively important and decisive deeds and states were versified, old age included. One of the best examples is the proverb connected to the old age ("It is true what they said in the old days that 'the older you get, the wetter you become.'"[176]), which is a clear sign of the place of this age in the thoughts that people were concerned about. In this context the fact that this phrase is rather negative has also been informative throughout the research.

In my selected sagas every person acted according to two set role models, the passive, moaning weak and the active, capable strong. There is only one exception: the character of Ófeigr, who, in a fantastic and unique way, uses the general prejudice against the old, in contrast to his distressed companions, to somehow break loose from this status. He shows society and his own son his abilities -- that an old man can fool the younger generation and act successfully in the masque of a useless *maður gamall*.

[176] The Saga of Hrafnkel Frey's Godi, 277. "Satt er flest það, er fornkveðið er, að svo ergist hver sem eldest" *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, chapter 17, http://www.sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda (last accessed May 16, 2011).

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