

Draugarnir: Revenants in Old Icelandic Sagas

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What are “*Draugar*” ?

In the course of reading the Icelandic family sagas, you cannot help but realize that the people of settlement-era Iceland had a strong connection to the harsh, forbidding land where they settled. As Jesse Byock points out in *Viking Age Iceland*, “Although Iceland, at 103,000 square kilometres (39,769 square miles), is a fifth larger than Ireland, it cannot support a large population. Most of the interior is uninhabitable ... The glaciers, often at low altitudes, are reminder of the nearness of the Arctic Circle, which lies a few degrees above the northern tip of the West Fjords.” (Byock 2001: 25) The interior landscape is both glacier-covered and volcanic, and only a small percent of the land can be used for farming. “Almost all successful settlements were near the coast or in a few sheltered island valley systems.” (Byock 2001: 27)

I believe that it is partly the harsh environment that leads to the prevalence of various monsters, witches, outlaws, and “others” who are separated from society in Old Icelandic sagas and the later literature of Iceland, all the way up to modern Icelandic folk-lore. In the sagas, we can see witches and curses, monsters, and, most importantly to our purposes today, revenants or *draugar*. A *draugr* (pl. *draugar*) may be defined as an undead, something like our zombies of today. Cleasby-Vigfusson defines the term:

DRAUGR, m. [Lat. truncus is perhaps akin]: I. a dry log; Edda (Gl.); this sense, however, only occurs in old poets, in compds such as el-draugr, beu-d., hirði-d., her-d., óðal-d. . jō-d., gervi-d., in poetical circumlocutions of a man, cp. Edda 68, 85. II. metaph. in prose (as it is now used), a ghost, spirit, esp. the dead inhabitant of a cairn was called draugr, Ld. 326, Fms. iii. 200,

Bs. i. 256, Stj. 492. í Sam. xxviii. 15, Róm. 186, 217, Orkn. 210 (in a verse), Fas. (Hervar. S.) i. 436-438, Hkv. 2. 49, fsl. (Harð. S.) ii. 47 (in a verse); it also occurs in the verse on the Runic stone in Schonen, quoted and explained in Rafn Antiq. Orient. 178, but it is uncertain whether it is here used in the first or second sense. P. a sluggard, a drone who walks about as a ghost; draugs-ligr, adj.; drauga-skapr, m.; draugast, að, to walk about like a ghost. (Cleasby: 103)

Georgia Dunham Kelchner defines them by saying, "The *draugr* is, apparently, thought of as having a continued existence as a unity of the body and the spirit. Primarily an inhabitant of his grave mound, he is also able to leave it, and thus preserve an effective relation with the living." (Kelchner: 66) This is opposed to the *haugboi*, also inhabitants of the grave mounds who stayed within their burial places. (Ellis: 80) The *haugboi* will often be an ancient warrior, who is buried with his greatest wealth and possessions. As Ellis points out, "We have also record of several kings burying themselves alive with much treasure, sometimes with a number of followers. In *Heimskringla*, King Herlaugr goes into a howe with twelve men rather than be deprived of his kingship by King Harald Hárfagr; in *Bárðar saga*, King Raknar is said to walk alive into his howe after ruling the land for a long time (XVM). Similarly a certain Agnarr is said to enter a howe with his ship's crew in *Þorskfirðinga Saga* (III). He is probably connected with Agði Jarl who goes alive into a howe specially built for the purpose in *Þorsteins Þáttur Bæarmagnis*. In nearly all these cases these men turn into powerful *draugar* after burial, and cannot be vanquished without a struggle; the same is true of another figure, in *Hrómundar Saga Greipssonar*, who 'when he was so old that he could fight no longer, had himself put living into the howe, and much treasure with him' (IV). " (Ellis: 56) This compares with Ellis on *draugar* who walk the earth after death: "*Draugr* is the word used for the animated corpse that comes forth from its grave-mound, or shows restlessness on the road to burial. These slain corpses ... are endowed by malignant magic with a hideous strength which enables them to rise and fight with the power of the *draugr*, which exceeds that of living men. There is no suggestion that the spirits of the dead are recalled into their bodies. The full horror of the dead raised on the battlefield is ... the idea of the spiritless corpse, maimed and wounded, showing nevertheless

inextinguishable vigour.” (Ellis: 80) We will see both *haugboi* and *draugar* in the sagas we will look at today.

Draugar are destructive creatures, too. William Sayers says, ““*draugar* favor the cold and dark of the long autumn and winter nights for their haunting. They seem tied to the geographic areas of their burial sites and former lives, and in their often stagewise return from distant graves to their communities, they kill livestock and shepherds, then household servants, and often end by riding the roof trees of farmhouses, a metonym of human culture in the North, terrorizing residents and seemingly intent on bringing down the buildings.” (Sayers: 243) However, they are not totally monstrous. Andy Orchard, writing about Grendel and his mother from *Beowulf* could just as easily be speaking of Þorgunna in the Eyrbyggja Saga, ““Moreover, despite the clear antagonism between the worlds of monsters and men, there is ... something deeply human about the monsters. All are given human attributes at some stage, and the poet even goes so far as to evoke our sympathy for their plight.” (Orchard: 29)

It is this humanity in a monster, that helps to show why these *draugar* fascinate us so much. The “others” that exist outside the boundaries of society: the weird old ladies that people label as evil witches, the misshapen, the “freaks” that Tod Browning made famous (Browning 1932) are funhouse mirror images of ourselves. Sirpa Aalto says, “The concept of *otherness* derives from social psychology. It is a concept that is used when group identities are studied. When people are trying to identify themselves and their group they tend to categorize. This is characteristic to all human beings. A human being identifies himself with a group, a so-called inner group, and creates a positive identity for this group. This positive identity can be created by dividing people into *us* and *them*, that is, the *others*. This also means that people are trying to create as great a difference as possible between *us* and *them* in order to achieve this positive group identity, and if it is possible they tend to exaggerate these differences.” (Aalto: 2)

A society will impose on the concept of the *other* its own fears about itself and its weaknesses. Janice Hawes states, “On a broader level, a monster can help a group define

itself by contrast with the monster. Each society has a certain minimum of norms and standards that an individual must honor in order to remain an accepted member of the group. Persons with different standards (or those who simply feel that they are above societal standards) will often find themselves rejected by their society. In other words they become “monsters” to their society, and it is these societal definitions of “outside” (and monstrous) versus “inside” (and human) that can form group cohesion and identity.” (Hawes 2004: 3) In *Beowulf*, Hroðgar warns Beowulf that the line between a worthy man and a monster is a fine one, and that God permits man to cross it. So it is with Grettir, so it could be with Beowulf, so it could be with any of us:

It is a great wonder
how almighty god in his magnificence
favours our race with rank and scope
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide

[Man] indulges in his desires; illness and old age
mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled
by envy or malice or thoughts of enemies
with their hate-honed swords. The whole world
conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst
until an element of overweening
enters him and takes hold
while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowns
grown too distracted. (*Beowulf*, ll. 1724-1727, 1735-1743 in Heaney: 119)

The line is drawn – become complacent regarding your soul and you may well become the monster you fear.

This concept of the “foreigner” is reflected in the tales of the Aesir, as they battle the giants and the monsters before and at Ragnarok. The gods are a reflection of man – both noble and ignoble. As Ursula Dronke says:

“[W]hat maimed and paradoxical characters some of them are. Týr, the patron of good faith among men, has forfeited his hand because he and the other gods kept bad faith when they chained the Wolf. Óðinn, who can see into all worlds, is one-eyed, because he sacrificed one eye to gain wisdom: and Baldr, whose judgements are the wisest, is fated to never see them carried out. Loki, the trickster, close companion of the gods, amoral and accident prone, with a genius for doing the wrong thing, is the begetter of the

monsters who attack the gods – almost the father of death itself, for Hel, the personified realm of the dead is his child.” (Dronke: 309)

The connector of the familiar gods to the alien monsters is Loki, the changeling god, the mischief god, and, for many, the most popular god. It is the humanity of Loki, his mischievous nature, that endears him to us. Through him, we can see the humanity of his siblings and offspring, and we feel empathy toward him and them. It is the spectrum of “society-outcast-monster” which we will see throughout our look at the various occurrences of revenants in the sagas.

Examples of *Draugarnir* in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

Laxdœla Saga

There is one significant occurrence of *draugar* in the *Laxdœla Saga* (The Saga of the People of Laxardal): the tale of Killer-Hrapp. Killer-Hrapp appears in both Njal’s Saga, where he is the fourth husband of Hallgerð (and also a known rapist and murderer), and in the *Laxdœla Saga* (chapters 10 ff.), where he is older and “was so aggressive that his neighbours could hardly stand up to him.” (LS: 297) He became infirm, he took to his bed. Just before his death he instructed his wife, Vigdis, to have him buried upright in the kitchen doorway so that he could keep watch over his property. From there he haunted the area surrounding his farm, Hrappsstadir. He killed many servants, drove off the farmers who lived around Hrappsstadir and caused his own widow, Vigdis, to flee.

Eventually the people of the area complained to Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson, the local leader, who disinterred Hrapp’s body and moved it some ways away. After this, Hrapp’s son, Sumarlidi, moved to Hrappsstadir, but he was driven insane by the presence of his father’s *draugr*; this left Vigdis, the widow, the sole owner of the property, but she refused to live there. Thorstein Surt, Vigdis’s brother, then took over the property. (LS: 297-298)

It happened that Thorstein Surt and his family members made preparations to move to Hrappsstadir. Once they were aboard a ferry, they had a series of difficulties, including running

aground. The saga tells us that while they were waiting for the tide to raise the boat, “they saw a seal, much larger than most swimming in the water nearby. It swam round and round the ship, its flippers unusually long, and everyone aboard was struck by its eyes, which were like those of a human. Thorstein told them to spear the seal and they tried, but to no avail.” (LS: 299). Immediately thereafter, when the tide rose and floated the boat, a storm struck which killed all aboard save one. The strong implication is that the seal is a *hamremi* “shape-shifting” (Zoëga: 183) of Hrapp’s *draugr*. Hrappsstadir remained deserted.

This situation continued for several years, until Olaf Huskaldsson Peacock arranged with his father, Hoskuld, to acquire the property adjacent to Hrappsstadir. Olaf was doing well at settling the land when one of his herdsman complained to him that Hrapp was again haunting the area. That evening, Olaf took his great spear, King’s Gift, with him and accompanied the servant back to the cowshed where Hrapp’s *draugr* was standing. The following occurred:

Olaf approached the door and prodded with his spear in Hrapp’s direction. Hrapp gripped the spear just above the blade in both his hands and gave it a wrench, breaking the shaft. Olaf made a run at him, but Hrapp let himself sink back down to where he had come from, ending their struggle. Olaf stood there with the spear shaft in his hand, for Hrapp had taken the blade.

Olaf and the servant tied the cattle in their places and returned to the farm where Olaf said the servant would not be punished for complaining [about Hrapp’s *draugr*]. The following morning, Olaf went out to where Hrapp had been buried and had him dug up. Hrapp’s body was perfectly preserved and Olaf found his spear blade there. He then had a large bonfire prepared, and had Hrapp’s body burned and his ashes taken out to sea. No one was bothered by Hrapp’s hauntings after that. (LS: 315-317)

In the hauntings of Hrapp’s *draugr*, we can see three fairly common motifs of the *draugr* stories: a man of great evil becoming a revenant, a *hamremi* being inhabited by the *draugr*, and an unusual burial ceremony. Although we see no other “standing” burials in the other sagas, we do see mound burials (Karr inn gamli in *Grettis Saga* and others who are seen sitting in their mounds), unrecovered drowning victims and corpses buried far from home (in *Eyrbyggja Saga*). The *hamremi* are also fairly common, both in sagas and folklore. The seeming humanity of a

seal's face leads to the stories of the selkies, and a seal-like *hamremi* is also seen in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. Men of evil or ill-will often become *draugr*. Caciola refers to this when she says:

The underlying logic of belief in revenants is that of a remaining life-force in the bodies of those who projected strong ill-will, or those who died suddenly, leaving 'energy still unexpended'. The bad death of malicious person gave cause for fear that his cantankerous vitality might live on within the corpse itself. ... Nearly all [of the undead] are represented as dangerous, terrorizing villages and bringing others to an untimely demise. ... They are particularly apt to attack those with whom they had some sort of connection: family members, mistresses and residents of the towns where they lived. ... " (Caciola: 29)

William Sayers notes that Olaf is "ineffectual against Hrapp in the revenant's nocturnal environment," and that he is "successful against the quiescent *draugr* only in the light of day." (Sayers, 1996: 247)

Killer-Hrapp's revenant is seemingly the personification of evil. He was a rapist, arsonist, and thief, having been exiled from Norway for offenses against the crown. He was the common-law husband of Hallgerð, the mean-spirited woman who provoked much of the evil in *Njals saga*. Finally, he was the bully who seemingly controlled his part of Laxardal by coercion. That he became a revenant is not a great surprise. The same cannot be said of the occurrence of revenants in *Eyrbyggja Saga*.

Eyrbyggja Saga

In this saga, we encounter two cases of *draugar* haunting areas. The first involves Thorolf Lam-foot (or Twist-foot), the father of Arnkell. Thorolf is described as being an exceedingly difficult man in life, violent and hard towards those who have done him wrong. He is seldom willing to compromise on a settlement, and late in life, he becomes angry with his son, who is a man of laws and settlements, not a true Viking like his father. Thorolf's ill-temper is shown by his refusals to compromise, and this stubborn streak costs him the opportunity to make a prosperous settlement of a suit. He returns to his home and sits in his seat of power, refusing to eat. During the night he dies, according to Sayers, "apparently imploding with anger and frustration". (Sayers, 1996: 250) After he dies, Thorolf begins to haunt the neighborhood. His

evil exudes from his cairn: “[T]he oxen that had hauled Thorolf to his grave had been ridden by *trolls*, and all the livestock that came anywhere near Thorolf’s cairn ran wild and bellowed themselves to death ... All the livestock which had been in the valleys were either found dead or they had strayed in the mountains, never to be found again. And if any birds landed on Thorolf’s cairn, they fell down dead at once” (ES: 173) Jennifer Livesay summarizes further occurrences:

In the meantime, Thorolf has died. This is far from the end of his involvement in the saga, however, for shortly after his death his ghost began to act up, haunting the farms in the valley in which he was buried until most of them were deserted. Arnkell (before his own death) had moved his father’s body to a new grave, and for a brief time the ghost was quiet, but resumed its haunting after Arnkell’s death. Nothing further is said about Thorolf until chapter 63, when he takes the form of a mysterious dapple grey bull which impregnates a cow owned by one of Snorri’s foster-brothers, Thorodd. The cow bears a dapple grey bull calf that grows unusually fast. Thorodd’s foster-mother, an old blind woman who is considered to have second sight, hears the bull calf and urges her son to kill it, saying it is not a natural calf, but a monster. Thorodd ridicules her for this talk, and in spite of her repeated warnings, he keeps the calf to fatten for slaughter; but before time for slaughtering in the fall, the bull kills him, thus avenging Arnkell. It then runs off and sinks into a swamp, and this is finally the end of Thorolf. (Livesay: 187)

Once again, a foul-tempered, violent individual finds no rest in death. Once again, folks ignore the warnings they are given. Once again, a *hamremi* brings death to an enemy of the *draugr*. The *draugr* works his way through the neighborhood, killing servants and cattle. Even after his corpse is burned by Thorodd, his spirit continues in the form of the bull, Glæsir (whose name is a cognate of the Old Icelandic *glæsa* “showy”), who kills Thorodd. As Sayers says,

In the sagas, this pattern of the trivial [in this case, ignoring the warning about the bull] proving critical is often repeated in the human actions that spark and sustain feud. ... [T]he *draugr*’s potential for malice can be co-effective with other supernatural forces if both go unattended. If the dead are not effectively dealt with and relations with the supernatural are mismanaged, disaster is compounded. (Sayers, 1996: 251)

The same lesson holds true in the more complicated tale of Thorgunna. She is a woman who lives in the stead that Thorodd keeps. His wife, Thurid, is envious of Thorgunna, particularly coveting the fine bed linens which Thorgunna brought with her from the Hebrides. Thorgunna, a strong, beautiful woman is also rumored to be a seer. Her death is a mysterious

one, harbingered by a rainstorm that seems composed of blood. Thorgunna says that she fears the bloody rain portends a death. That very night she took to her bed and died shortly thereafter. Realizing she was dying, Thorgunna carefully explained how she wanted her possessions disposed of. In particular, she wished her bed and bedclothes (sheets, pillows, etc) to be burned. When Thorodd attempted to carry out Thorgunna's wishes, his wife, Thurid, would not allow him to burn the bedclothes. (ES: 196-198) This led to problems.

On the journey to her burial site, the horse refused to carry the coffin, attempting to throw it from his back. When the burial party stopped for the night, the farmer refused to give them food and hospitality, instead merely letting them stay just inside the door, far from the fire. In the middle of the night, Thorgunna's *draugr* made its first appearance:

Once they were in their beds, they heard a great racket in the pantry, and wondered whether thieves had got inside. When they came to the pantry, they could see a tall woman standing there. She was completely naked, without a stitch on, and she was preparing a meal. The people who saw her were so frightened that they did not dare go near her. When the coffin-bearers heard this they went to see what was going on. It was Thorgunna, and they all thought it wise not to interfere with her. And when she had done what she had wanted, she carried the food into the main room, set the table, and served their meal.

Then the coffin-bearers said to the farmer, "It may be well that before we leave, you'll consider yourself to have paid a high price for not putting us up."

The farmer and the mistress of the house replied, "We will gladly give you food and whatever hospitality you require."

As soon as the farmer had offered them hospitality, Thorgunna walked out of the main room and she was not seen again. (ES: 199)

Even after this, Thurid ignores Thorgunna's instructions and refuses to burn the bedclothes. This leads to further troubles. Thurid's greed leads to what Sayers calls, "a dysfunctional relationship with the supernatural, and responsibility for the negative effects that are soon manifest ultimately lies with [Thurid]." (Sayers, 1996: 249) A supernatural seal, Thorgunna's *hamremi*, appears and stares menacingly at the bedclothes. Later, the same seal eats the household's entire stock of dried fish. Farmhands die and return as *draugar*. Thoridd and his men drown at sea and are not recovered; they return as *draugar* and invite themselves to their

own funeral feast. In all, almost a dozen revenants are to be found at Eyrbyggja, and the majority of the thirty remaining servants flee. (ES: 199-202)

The *draugar* are finally run off by a combination of actions. First, Thurid's son, Kjartan, tears down the bedclothes and burns them, satisfying Thorgunna's *draugr* which disappears. Second, Snorri *goði* brings door suit (a provision of Old Icelandic law whereby a plaintiff may bring suit against a defendant by appearing at the defendant's doorway and stating his suit) against the remaining *draugar*. Knowing they have been sued justly, the *draugar* leave the living in peace. (ES: 203) It may be one of the few times in recorded history that a haunting has been solved by law.

Once again, however, we see that the living, by a seemingly innocent (if greedy) action, offend the dead and bring doom down on their heads. The farmer who refuses comfort to the coffin-bearers, is deeply at fault, both by law (see *Gragas* I, § Kþ2) and custom. It is not surprising that Thorgunna, who was suspected of being something of a witch in life, would seek revenge against him after death. When Thurid, who was party to a feud that Thorgunna was involved in while alive, effectively steals Thorgunna's bedclothes and defies her death-bed wish, she brings the fate down on herself. After that, despite more and worse things occurring, Thurid stubbornly remains and keeps the bedclothes. Kjartan practically has to rip them from her grasp in order to burn them. Even after the hauntings have concluded, the effect of them is felt. "[S]ocietal balance is not restored until eighteen of the thirty servants have died and another five have fled. As in *Laxdœla Saga*, the economic dimension of revenant activity is made explicit." (Sayers, 1996: 249)

Grettis Saga

In *Grettis Saga*, we have a very interesting and significant hero, Grettir Asmundarson. He is descended from Onund Tree-foot, a great Viking warrior and from Egil Skallagrimsson. Egil was not only a great poet, but also a prodigious warrior. A tale is told that Egil may have been a giant, which is borne out by the very good chance that Egil suffered from Paget's Disease.

(Byock, 1993) Byock notes that Egil was different from his fellows. “Despite his prowess and his established social status, Egil’s temperament as well as his physical appearance caused alarm; he is portrayed as a dark, ugly, brooding character. Grettir was very much like his ancestor, as is indicated by his name. In his thesis, "Old Norse Nick-Names," Paul Peterson notes that the given name, Grettir, may derive from either the ON for grimacer, grinner, as in the settler Ófeigr grettir Einarsson (who is named in *Grettis Saga*); or from a *heiti* for a 'snake' in skaldic poetry, as in the kenning *grettis sóttir* > diseases of the snake > WINTER. This nickname becomes an inherited personal name. (Peterson: 26)

In possessing these troubling characteristics Egil resembles his father and grandfather; both are remembered in the saga as physically menacing and psychologically different from their otherwise fair and handsome kinsmen.” (Byock, 1993: 24-25) This also appears to have been inherited by his descendants. We know that Paget’s Disease is an inherited disorder which causes a thickening of the bones. It also causes disfigurement of the face and a heavily-boned, sloped shoulder appearance. Grettir is described as a youth as having a broad, squarish face, as being very strong, and a troublesome youth. He often defied his father and was outlawed for the first time when barely a teenager. He sinks his axe so deeply into a man’s skull that, as Grettir says in a verse:

I imagine a cleft-dwelling troll
made a wild rush for Skeggi,
that battle axe was thirsty
to taste blood just now.
Nor sparing her fangs, she stretched
her harsh mouth over his head,
split his forehead in two.
I was there when they fought (GS:69-70)

Of course, he refers to himself as a troll, ugly and huge. He does not fear to fight three, or even four men at once, according to his own boast. Soon he is known for his prodigious feats of strength. Andy Orchard says, “If there is an uncrossable gorge, an unscalable peak, or a boulder so large that no ordinary man could lift it, Grettir’s name has been promptly attached to

it, on the grounds that he leapt over chasms, climbed peaks, and heaved up rocks like no one else.” (Orchard: 148) Indeed, two locales named in *Grettis Saga* are called *Grettishaf* (after the Old Icelandic *haf* “lifting”). So, Grettir is larger than life. He is a man destined to battle the super-natural. He is also a great poet, much like his ancestor, Egil. Further, he is a man attracted to violence and feuds, like his great-grandfather, Onund Tree-foot. It is this combination of strength, prowess, violence, and wit which helps make him a proud man - so proud that it costs him his life. It also leads him to two encounters with *draugar*.

The first is with Karr in gamli (Kar the Old). Karr is buried in a howe near the homestead of Audun, an important chieftain. One evening, Grettir saw a flame issuing from the headland near the farm. Audun tells Grettir that “after Karr died he returned from the dead and started walking, so much so that in the end he drove away all those farmers who owned lands here. Now Thorfinn alone owns the whole island, and no harm from these happenings comes to those under Thorfinn’s protection.” (GS: 74-75) Grettir decides to dig into the mound, despite the warnings from Audun. When he returns, he digs through the walls and enters the mound. He chooses treasure to steal from the mound, but is caught. Grettir and Karr battled ferociously, and in the end, Grettir defeats the *huagboi*, cutting off its head and putting the head against its buttocks to keep it walking again. He returns to Thorfinn's farm where he claims only the sword, Kar's Gift, as his own. (GS: 74-75)

This incident has a couple of remarkable things in it. First, the way of disposing of the *draugr*: cutting off his head and placing it at his buttocks. We haven't seen this before, but Grettir does it twice in the saga. The second is that Grettir claims very little of the treasure. He willingly gives the vast amount to Thorfinn who is unhappy that Grettir acted without his permission. Grettir requests only one thing, a seax (a type of short sword) which will be known as *Kársnautr*, "Kar's Gift," and which will prove Grettir's downfall.

Although he is glad to have gained treasure, Thorfinn insists that Grettir prove he is worthy of it by accomplishing something worthy of fame. Grettir earns the seax by killing a band of roving *berserks*. According to the *Ynglinga Saga*, these are warriors who are “devoted to the war-god Odin, possibly part of an Odinic cult: ‘His [Odin’s] men went to battle without armour and acted like mad dogs or wolves. They bit into their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They killed people, but neither fire nor iron harmed them. This madness is called berserker-fury.” (Hollander: 10) Grettis Saga also speaks of “wolfskins”, berserkers who fight for King Harald. Much as is true with the *dragr/hemremi*, the berserker may be viewed as a monster, closely related to the shape-shifters: “The use of the metaphysical *hamr* or *fylgja* was paralleled in the Viking Age by the practice of animal-masking for the purpose of transforming a human’s nature, most frequently seen in the induction of *berserkergang*, regarding which the physical animal skin and the spiritual power of *hamr*-use appear to have been not only fundamental, but even perhaps interchangeable.” (Grundy: 14) Grettir defeats the berserkers by both arms and wits, getting them drunk and locking them into a stone house. He then killed them as they tried to break out of their prison. (GS: 77-81) Needless to say, defeating a band of berserkers is a great feat of arms. Grettir writes a verse, bragging of his feat:

Twelve wielders of the battle-flame
I sent to a sea-lapped grave
alone and undaunted I brought
swift death upon them all.
Woman, high-born tree of gold,
what deed that one man does
will ever be worthy of praise
if this one counts for little? (GS:81)

After it Thorfinn agreed that Grettir deserved the seax and he invited Grettir to return and enjoy his hospitality.

This seax follows in a long line of such swords, and it is equally as doomed. Andy Orchard says, “This same seax, the importance of which is therefore stressed several times in this

episode, recurs throughout the rest of the saga, and is the weapon with which Grettir fights every monster ... until Grettir's last battle, in which he himself falls, and where, as is indicated, the *seax* is indeed the last thing to leave his hands, in rather grisly circumstances..." (Orchard: 145)

The second and most significant *draugr* that Grettir fights and kills is Glam. This shepherd, who in his life was already a powerful man, was a heathen and ill-tempered. "He was a well-built man and very strange-looking with wide blue eyes and wolf-grey hair." (GS:100) When the Yule season arrived, Glam demanded that he be served meat. Thorhall's wife declined to serve him food, for it was a fast day. Glam answered, "You have all sorts of superstitions that I dismiss as worthless. ...I preferred the way people were when they were called heathens." He then threatens Thorhall's wife with violence. (GS: 93) He went out in a storm to tend to his flocks and the next day was found , "black as Hel and swollen as fat as a bull." He apparently was killed by a monster in the night. This violent death is what caused Glam to become a *draugr*. (GS:100-101)

After he turned, Glam took his vengeance on the stead. He began "riding the roof" of the house. This involves climbing to the roof, straddling the roof beam, and bouncing on it until it breaks, destroying the house. He kills a shepherd who replaces him, and soon every farmer in the area has abandoned his stead. Glam forces Thorhall to abandon his farm for the winter months. When Thorhall returned, things went on as before. Finally, Thorhall's daughter was killed. At this point in the saga, Grettir arrives, eager to match himself against Glam, despite the warnings he received from his uncle, Jokul Bardarson, who tells him that "evil begets evil as far as Glam is concerned." (GS: 104)

The fight between Grettir and Glam makes the saga something of a parallel to Beowulf and Grendel. Grettir stayed in the stead and interrupted Glam's roof-riding. Glam entered the hall and Grettir attacked him, eventually moving the fight out of the house. Grettir threw Glam, but

the monster was not yet done. Although Grettir defeats him, Glam lays a curse on him, dooming him to a life of outlawry and eventual death: “I will not take from you the strength you have already acquired. But it is in my power to decide you will never be stronger than you are. ... from now on you will fall into outlawry and killings ... And further, I lay this curse upon you: these eyes will always be within your sight, and you will find it difficult to be alone. This will drag you to your death.” (GS: 102)

Glam’s curse becomes the central moment of Grettir’s life. After it, Grettir is constantly in fear of the night. He never wins another major battle, is soon outlawed, and after almost three years on the run, he is killed by a posse.

Orchard points out that by ignoring the warnings of Jokul Bardarson, Grettir essentially is doomed by his pride. “[T]he very fact that such advice foreshadows the encounter with Glámr as the major turning point in the narrative. ... Grettir has overstepped the mark here, and beheads Glámr with the *seax Kársnautr* in a clear echo of his treatment of the *draugr Kárr*” (Orchard: 156-158) It is that very same sword, Kar's Gift, that is used by Thorbjorn Hook to behead Grettir when he is finally killed. The blows break the blade. (GS: 176)

In Conclusion

There are many other *draugar* in the sagas and the *Heimskringla*, many of them great evil. Indeed, the Icelandic sagas have more references to *draugar* and other supernatural beings than any other early literature. It is natural to ask why this should be. As Byock notes “The Icelandic walking dead are probably an old cultural feature in Scandinavian folk tradition. They are connected with the fear and power of darkness and reflect the possibility of continued material life of the individual after death.” Even the advent of Christianity does not seem to have stopped this belief. “Christian teachings treat soulless bodies as animated by devils or demons, whereas Icelandic ghosts (*draugar*) come back to life by their volition and not by external possession.” While we make think of zombies in our folklore as being the embodiment of

unthinking evil, “Icelandic sources portray a nuanced and extensive picture of what might once have been beliefs concerning the living dead...” (Byock 2009: xxi) As DuBois points out, there were “holy-mountain” cults in pre-Christian Norway and Iceland: “in the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, Þórr worshippers Þórólfr Mostar-skeggi (“Moster-beard”) and his son Þorsteinn Þorskabítr (“Cod-biter”) are both said to retire shortly after death to a particular familial mountain, where they dwell and feast in the company of their ancestors. ... *Landnámabók* notes that the descendants of Icelandic settler Auðr Djúpúðga (“the Deep-minded”), a Christian, reverted to holy-mountain worship after her death.” (DuBois: 76)

The Icelandic tradition of wrestling with ghosts and fighting *draugar* persists to this day in folklore. Perhaps it is the source for our zombie-burdened culture today. Except, instead of “BRAINS”, the *draugar* come for blood and revenge.

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