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THE SILENCED TRAUMA IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*[1]

1. Introduction

'BÆNDUR FLUGUST Á', or 'farmers fighting each other': this is Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík's description of the *Íslendingasögur*, the 'family sagas'. Despite its apparent cynicism, Jón's impression is accurate in that it seems true that saga characters release social tension by seizing every opportunity to initiate fights, duels, and skirmishes, which often turn into long-lasting feuds.[2] It would be only logical, then, for the narratives to feature countless descriptions of injuries and of impairments; yet, the *Íslendingasögur* refrain from dealing at length with injuries, wounds, chopped-off legs, or other physical or mental traumas. In contrast to the modern-day culture of intensive discussion of physical and mental well-being, the *Íslendingasögur* follow a different path by remaining silent about impairments. One cannot help but develop the impression that such incidents are not considered relevant either for the plot or for the character concerned.[3]

Nonetheless, dis/ability[4] does not go unnoticed in the saga world, even though it is not often verbally expressed and addressed. This article aims

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2 In this article, the terms *saga world*, *saga character*, and *saga society* refer exclusively to observations made in context of the genre of the *Íslendingasögur*.

3 See John P. Sexton, "Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas," *Disability in the Middle Ages. Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. by Joshua R. Eyler (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 149–150; and Lois Bragg "From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature," *Disability & Society* 12.2 (1997): 172–173.

4 On dis/ability studies, the spelling of dis/ability with a slash, and the differentiation between *impairment* and *disability*, see below.

to unlock the silence of the *Íslendingasögur* regarding embodied difference that saga characters experience and suffer through their participation in combat. I argue that this silence has deeply personal implications for the impaired characters concerned and can potentially be understood as an expression of trauma connected to a loss of symbolic capital, in the sense articulated by Pierre Bourdieu.

When a saga character becomes impaired, three different but interrelated responses by the saga character, saga society, and the saga narrative can be identified. Saga characters, mostly men, who are wounded in combat and suffer an impairment, hardly ever voice their attempts to cope with the situation and remain silent. They are left alone to work through this traumatic experience and come to terms with the impairment and its potential implications for their social standing and reputation – that is, the loss of symbolic capital through the impairment becoming a disability. Saga society, is not interested in the feelings or the personal and social implications of an impairment. For saga society, the body is primarily of interest as a valuable asset that is used for negotiating peace agreements and defining compensation payments; in part, these discussions aim at redressing the impaired character, but their greater purpose is the restoration of social equilibrium. Once negotiations have successfully come to a close, neither the saga character nor the impairment are of societal concern any longer, and any social reaction fades into silence.

The silence on the intradiegetic level is also mirrored on the extradiegetic level, where the narratorial voice tends to mention injuries and impairments inflicted in battle only in passing and expresses these details using an unemotional and matter-of-fact tone. The saga narrative itself thus resorts to a fragmentary depiction of impairment in order to maintain an ostensibly objective stance. In refraining from dealing with such traumatising experiences, saga narratives employ the device of narrative prosthesis. Modelled on the idea of a material prosthesis, the concept of narrative prosthesis refers to the use of textual elements and modes to disguise or distract attention from potentially unsettling embodied difference in order not to disturb an audience.[5] Hence, the silence in the *Íslendingasögur*

5 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Corporealities: Discourses of Disability (Ann Arbor (MI): The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3–8.

towards impairment functions as a narrative prosthesis, but it should not be considered an expression of indifference or even ignorance; rather, it emerges as a serious and telling taciturnity that strongly urges an audience to read between the lines.

In this article, I suggest that the narrative silence of these texts represents a disability, or more accurately an inability – namely, the inability to deal with traumatic incidents of impairment on the narratological level of the saga as much as on the intradiegetic level of the saga characters and their society. After a brief introduction to those aspects of dis/ability studies and dis/ability history that are foundational for my argument, I focus on an episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 45) as a starting point and case study to support my argument; the discussion also occasionally draws on examples from other *Íslendingasögur*. Methodologically, the aforementioned dis/ability approach is complemented by and expanded in reference to further relevant concepts, including the previously mentioned idea of narrative prosthesis, insights from trauma theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of capital. I argue that these theoretical concepts offer a way to see beyond the reluctance of the sagas to talk about embodied difference and to understand how saga society attempts to deal with the traumatic experience of dis/ability.

Before beginning the discussion, it is important to define certain terminological usages. I use the terms *dis/ability* and *embodied difference* synonymously to refer generally to a holistic, multi-faceted, and context-dependent discourse of dis/ability as outlined and developed by scholars such as Cordula Nolte, Irina Metzler, and Tom Shakespeare.[6] Moreover, I spell *dis/ability* with a slash in order to emphasise the complex relationship between disability and ability, which are best thought of not as mutually

6 For modern dis/ability studies, see Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs* (London: Routledge, 2006) and *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2014). For dis/ability history, see Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking About Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (London: Routledge, 2006); Christina Lee, "Abled, Disabled, Enabled: An Attempt to Define *Disability* in Anglo-Saxon England," *Dis/ability*, ed. by Cordula Nolte, WerkstattGeschichte 65 (Essen: Klartext, 2015), 41–54; Cordula Nolte, "Editorial," *Dis/ability*, ed. by Cordula Nolte, WerkstattGeschichte 65 (Essen: Klartext, 2015), 3–8; and Nolte et. al., *Dis/ability History der Vormoderne: ein Handbuch. Premodern Dis/ability History: A Companion* (Affalterbach: Didymos, 2017).

exclusive, but rather as inseparable categories of analysis.[7] The distinction that I employ between *impairment* and *disability* emerges from certain branches of dis/ability studies that differentiate between the two terms,[8] using *impairment* to denote the medical aspects of a dis/ability and *disability* to refer collectively to potential social reactions that can take place to an impairment (e.g. tolerance or stigma). In their studies into medieval, mostly non-Scandinavian European sources, Irina Metzler and Christina Lee observe that these sources primarily show impairment, which suggests the distinction is a useful one for analysis of medieval material.[9] Consequently, I follow Metzler and Lee to the extent that I distinguish between impairment and disability whenever applicable or helpful for the argument.

Finally, it should be noted that the Old Norse texts quoted in the following pages use terms that may appear offensive and derogative to a modern audience. The terms are quoted unchanged in order to give an unaltered impression of the original semantics and their contexts. Thus, the choice and use of the Old Norse terms represent neither the author's choice of formulation, nor her personal opinion on the topic of dis/ability. In the general discussion of dis/ability, which is informed by recent scholarship, I use terms that are as neutral as possible in their connotations so as not to offend or hurt people.

2. Dis/ability Studies and Dis/ability history

In the 1980s the field of dis/ability studies emerged from an intense and newly surfaced discourse about society's reaction to and interaction with disabled people. Strongly influenced by disability activism, dis/ability studies has experienced significant developments in moving from a pre-

7 Cordula Nolte, "Editorial," 3–4.

8 One of these branches is that of 'social dis/ability studies', which was first developed in the UK in the 1970s. This model maintains that it is society that disables people because it is not open enough to accept embodied difference; it thus proposes thinking about the binary pair of impairment / disability in order to capture the physical and social issues that disabled people have to deal with. For further reading, see Shakespeare, "Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited," and Watson et al., *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Routledge, 2012).

9 Metzler, "Disability in Medieval Europe," 190; Lee, "Abled, Disabled, Enabled," 41.

dominantly medical approach, which saw dis/ability as a defect inherent to an individual,[10] to a more holistic understanding of dis/ability.[11] Because of the universal presence of dis/ability in society, dis/ability studies play a crucial role in any sociocultural discourse. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky therefore demand that '[l]ike gender, like race, disability must become a standard analytical tool in the historian's tool chest'.[12] Only then will it be possible to move beyond a monothematic history of dis/ability.

The subfield of dis/ability history, which has developed over the past few decades, shares the premise that dis/ability is most accurately understood as a multifactorial phenomenon. Yet whilst dis/ability studies and dis/ability history share certain critical approaches and research questions, they are distinctive disciplines for a simple reason: it is not generally advisable to apply modern dis/ability concepts and methodological tools directly to premodern sources. The need to take sociocultural contexts into account becomes even more pressing with regard to premodern sources, as there is no fixed definition of dis/ability that applies in all historical contexts; rather, the notion of dis/ability can be defined only in relation to a particular set of social, economic, cultural, temporal, and geographical parameters, and is therefore given shape in countless expressions. Accordingly, one of the basic research questions in dis/ability history more broadly is whether premodern societies used a concept of dis/ability that was defined by physical, mental, and psychological parameters.[13]

Yet our comparatively limited understanding of the various contextual parameters outlined above means that it is often much more challenging to define dis/ability in earlier historical contexts than in our contemporary

10 Shakespeare "Disability Rights and Wrongs," 15–19, and "Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited," 13.

11 The scope of this article does not allow for a detailed overview of the state of the art in the field of dis/ability studies. For further reading, see Shakespeare, "Disability Rights and Wrongs" and "Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited;" Watson, "Routledge Handbook;" and Joshua R. Eyler, *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

12 Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky. "Introduction: Disability History: from the Margins to the Mainstream," *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. by Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 15.

13 Bianca Frohne and Cordula Nolte, "In der Werkstatt: Das Forschungsprogramm 'Dis/ability History in der Vormoderne,'" *Dis/ability History der Vormoderne: ein Handbuch. Premodern Dis/ability History: A Companion*, ed. by Cordula Nolte, Bianca Frohne, Uta Halle and Sonja Kerth (Affalterbach: Didymos, 2017), 21.

world. Because of this difficulty, many scholars consider it helpful to speak of *embodied difference*.[14] Any physical or mental difference – be it a congenital, temporary, or lasting impairment – eventually becomes an embodied difference. This concept not only frees us from conventional perspectives, enabling us to paint a more diversified picture, but also emphasises how physical as well as mental health issues are manifested in and expressed through the body, which remains a central element in the discussion on dis/ability. The body acts as a translator and makes the embodied difference visible to the society.[15]

Within Old Norse literary studies, dis/ability history perspectives have been introduced only in the last couple of decades.[16] In the 1990s, Lois Bragg took up the dis/ability discourse in various articles that were later collected in her seminal book *Oedipus borealis* (2004).[17] Since then, the topic of dis/ability has generated some interest in the field, not least in relation to Old Norse mythology and the conspicuously high number of physically impaired gods.[18] Regarding Old Norse saga literature, especially

14 Nolte, "Editorial," 3; and Anne Waldschmidt, "Warum und wozu brauchen die Disability Studies die Disability History? Programmatische Überlegungen," *Disability History: Konstruktionen von Behinderung in der Geschichte. Eine Einführung*, ed. by Elsbeth Bösl, Anne Klein and Anne Waldschmidt, Disability Studies: Körper – Macht – Differenz 6 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010) 14–15.

15 Visibility is not necessarily coterminous with scrutinising glances or staring, but refers in the first place to becoming aware and perceiving embodied difference. On the topic of staring, see Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

16 For an overview of the state-of-the-art of history in Old Norse literary studies, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Fötlun á Íslandi á miðöldum: Svipmyndir," *Fötlun og menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi*, ed. by Hanna Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, and Kristín Björnsdóttir (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands – Rannsóknarsetur í fötlunarfræðum, 2013), 51–69; and Ármann Jakobsson et al., "Disability Before Disability: Mapping the Uncharted in the Medieval Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 92.4 (2020): 440–460.

17 See Lois Bragg, "Disfigurement, Disability, and Dis-integration in *Sturlunga saga*," *alvíssmál* 4 (1994): 15–32, "Mute God", "Impaired and Inspired: The Makings of a Medieval Icelandic Poet," *Madness, Disability and Social Exclusion: The Archaeology and Anthropology of 'Difference,'* ed. by Jane Hubert, (London / New York: Routledge, 2000), 128–143, and *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Madison / Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004).

18 See Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, "'Blindur er betri en brenndur sé': Um norræna guði og skerðingar," *Fötlun og menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi*, ed. by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson, and Kristín Björnsdóttir, (Reykjavík: Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands – Rannsóknasetur í fötlunarfræðum, 2013), 27–49.

the *Íslendingasögur*, the main research interest of dis/ability-oriented publications has been in the analysis of injured and impaired saga characters[19] and less on the narratological function of and saga society's reaction to dis/ability. In the following discussion, I explore how saga society deals with dis/ability and suggest some analytical tools, i.e. narrative prosthesis and trauma theory, that may prove effective for moving beyond the silence of non-verbalised and potentially traumatising experiences of dis/ability.

3. The Case of the Þorbrandssynir

Chapter 45 of *Eyrbyggja saga* presents an account of a battle and its aftermath, told in a superficially humorous way. Shortly before Yule, the now-rival groups of the Þorbrandssynir and the Þorlákssynir unexpectedly encounter each other at a cliff of the ice-covered Vigrafjǫrðr on the Snæfellsnes peninsula, where they immediately begin to exchange blows. The fight is the climax of long-simmering animosities between these two groups, who were once relatively closely acquainted and are already connected by marriage. Tensions first arose when Þorleifr kimbi Þorbrandsson has his request to marry the sister of the Þorlákssynir denied on the alleged grounds that Þorleifr is unmanly and has not avenged insulting statements and actions against him in the past. Several men become wounded in the fight and the Þorbrandssynir retreat to the farm of their foster-brother Snorri goði at Helgafell.

Snorri goði accommodates the men and takes care of their wounds. The saga mentions Þóroddr Þorbrandsson's large neck-wound first ('hafði svá mikit sár aptan á hálsinn,'[20] [(he) had such a big wound at the back of his neck]), then turns to a second wound of his that seems to be discovered only by accident. As the men at Helgafell assist Þóroddr with taking off his blood-soaked leggings, they comment that it is difficult to remove his

19 For studies on impaired saga characters, see, for example: Bragg, "Disfigurement", "Impaired and Inspired," and *Oedipus Borealis*; Ármann Jakobsson, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: *Bárðar saga* and its Giants," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 15 (2005): 1–15, "Svipmyndir," and *The Troll Inside You: Paranormal Activity in the Medieval North* (New York: Punctum Books, 2017); and Sexton, "Difference and Disability."

20 *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit 4 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag 1935, repr. 1985), 129. All English translations from Old Norse sources are my own.

leggings: 'Eigi er þat logit af yðr Þorbrandssonum, er þér eruð sundrgørðamenn miklir, at þér hafið klæði svá þrǫng, at eigi verðr af yðr komit'[21] [It is no lie that you, sons of Þorbrandr, are very fancy dressers, as you have such tight-fitting clothes that it is difficult to get them off you]. Only then does Snorri goði notice that it is not the tight clothes that are the problem, but rather the fact that 'spjót stóð í gegnum fótinn milli hásinarinnar ok fótleggsins'[22] [a spear pierced the leg through between the heel and the lower leg]. Despite this description of the wound, the saga does not specify, or even mention, if and how the men take care of it; the audience is left to assume that this severe wound is treated medically.

The scene is soon after mirrored in the depiction of Þóroddr's brother Snorri, of whom it is initially said that he 'var hressastr þeira bræðra'[23] [was in the best condition of the brothers]. This comment is soon put into perspective, however, when it turns out that Snorri is having difficulty eating; and on being asked why he is eating so little and so slowly, Snorri answers laconically that 'lǫmbunum væri tregast um átit, fyrst er þau eru nýkefld'[24] [lambs are quite reluctant to eat just after they are newly gagged].[25] As he did previously, Snorri goði investigates his kinsman for a further wound; in feeling his name-sake's throat, he discovers a broken-off arrowhead sticking in the throat down to the root of his tongue ('Þá þreifaði Snorri goði um kverkrnar á honum ok fann, at ǫr stóð um þverar kverkrnar ok í tungurœtrnar,'[26] [Then Snorri goði felt his (Snorri Þorbandsson's) throat and found that an arrow stood across the throat and in the roots of the tongue]). This time, however, it is made explicit that the object is removed with the help of a pair of tongs, but again the saga does not say how the wound is treated after the arrow-head's removal. Instead, the short scene is brought to a close with another offhanded comment: 'Ok eptir þat mataðisk hann [Snorri]'[27] [And after that he ate].

21 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 129.
22 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.
23 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.
24 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.
25 This statement alludes to the practice of farmers weaning lambs by putting a stick in their mouth laterally, meaning that they can no longer suckle as the stick pokes the udder of the ewe.
26 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.
27 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.

One of the striking aspects of this episode is the way the wounds are noticed and dealt with on a narratological level. The injuries are not noticed because a character expresses severe pain or because the wounds are quickly identified by the people at Helgafell; rather, they are noticed only when those injured find it difficult to perform mundane actions. Astonishingly, it is not the warriors themselves but Snorri goði, a third party, who discovers the literal thorn in each character's flesh. Furthermore, Snorri goði identifies the nature of injuries because he *feels* the limbs that are causing problems. In each case, the verb *þreifa*, meaning 'to feel with the hand, touch'[28] is used to express how Snorri goði traces and identifies the impaired person's medical problem, as is apparent from the above quotation regarding Snorri Þorbrandsson's injury and the following lines regarding Þóroddr's leg injury: 'Þá gekk til Snorri goði ok þreifaði um fótinn [Þórodds] ok fann, at spjót stóð í gegnum fótinn milli hásinarinnar ok fótleggsins ok hafði níst allt saman, fótinn ok brókina'[29] [Then Snorri the chieftain went up and touched the foot (of Þóroddr) and realised that a spear pierced the leg between the heel and the lower leg and had pinned everything together, the leg and the breeches]. Apparently, saga characters have an unusually high tolerance for pain.

The saga then turns back to Þóroddr and the injury at the back of his neck that was first mentioned. As the blow that Þóroddr received has cut through the sinews, his head is tilted slightly forward. While Þóroddr wants Snorri goði to reposition his head in a violent manner, Snorri goði refuses to do anything about the injury. Instead, he offers a rudimentary medical analysis of the situation and mentions a period of healing. In the form of a prolepsis the audience is even told about the result, a rare insight:

> Þá segir Þóroddr, at Snorri vildi grœða hann at ørkumlamanni, en Snorri goði kvazk ætla, at upp myndi hefja hǫfuðit, þá er sinarnar knýtti; en Þóroddr vildi eigi annat en aptr væri rifit sárit ok sett hǫfuðit réttara. En þetta fór sem Snorri gat, at þá er sinarnar knýtti, hóf upp hǫfuðit, ok mátti hann lítt lúta jafnan síðan.[30]

28 Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, in assoc. with the Medieval Academy of America, 2004), 516.

29 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 129–130.

30 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 130.

> [Then Þóroddr says that Snorri wanted to heal him by making him a cripple, but Snorri the chieftain said he thought that the head would raise up again once the sinews knitted together; but Þóroddr did not want anything other than for the wound to be torn open again and the head set straighter. But it went as Snorri guessed: when the sinews knitted together, the head raised up, and from then on he could only bend it slightly.]

Þóroddr's reaction to Snorri goði's decision is striking in that he does not consider himself maimed at this point: In Þóroddr's opinion, he will only become an *ørkumlamaðr*, that is, a person maimed for life, if Snorri refuses to do something about his head.[31] The conceptualisation of the impairment as a lasting condition is thus only a possible outcome and not yet seen as a reality, since the outcome depends on Snorri goði's actions. He is evidently skilled in treating wounds and predicting healing processes, as his suggestion proves to be true: the sinews heal and Þóroddr's head straightens again. The only remaining consequence is that Þóroddr can no longer properly incline his head, but this issue is of no importance for the rest of the saga.

The episode concludes with the saga stating that Snorri goði healed all the Þorbrandssynir. This is not entirely true, however, as Þorleifr kimbi, the third brother, was also involved in the fight and was wounded. During a fierce exchange of blows, 'hjó hann (Steinþórr Þorláksson) til Þorleifs kimba ok undan honum fótinn fyrir neðan kné'[32] [he (Steinþórr Þorlákssonr) struck at Þorleifr kimbi and cut off his leg below the knee]. Later, at Helgafell, nothing is said about whether and how Þorleifr's wound is taken care of. It is only at the very end of the chapter that one short sentence informs the audience about Þorleifr's fate: 'Þorleifr kimbi gekk alla stund síðan við tréfót'[33] [From then on Þorleifr kimbi always walked with a wooden leg].

31 The word *ørkum(b)lamaðr* translates as 'maimed person, cripple, invalid'. The semantic core is a compound of *ørr* ('scar') and *kum(b)l* ('mark, sign, badge'); see Zoëga, "Dictionary," 530, 251. *Ørkumlamaðr* thus emphasises the fact that the scars are not temporary, but mark the individual for a lifetime; hence, being or becoming an *ørkumlamaðr* implies a crucial change in one's fate.

32 *Eyrbyggja saga,* 127–128.

33 *Eyrbyggja saga,* 130.

It is worth noting that this episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* is in many ways unusual within the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur* precisely because of its lengthy description of the events at Helgafell and its detailed depictions of the brothers' injuries and impairments. Yet whilst the passage is not paradigmatic of the *Íslendingasögur*, it nonetheless offers a good starting point for further discussions of dis/ability. Its unusual features potentially facilitate an approach to the topic of dis/ability in the sagas, because the contrast to conventional saga comments on injuries and impairments is made clearer by comparison. The episode can therefore serve as a useful bridge to the main focus of the article, namely the narrative silence regarding dis/ability and trauma.

4. 'Silence of the Limbs'

It is striking how seemingly uninterested *Eyrbyggja saga* is in telling the audience about Þorleifr kimbi's fate, particularly as regards the last sentence in the episode about his wooden leg, but this brevity and detached style is encountered fairly regularly when sagas talk about injuries and impairments. Still, the apparent indifference of the *Íslendingasögur* in this respect should not be considered to the detriment of these narratives. Being taciturn does not necessarily imply that the sagas are devoid of engagement with dis/ability; rather, this apparent lack suggests that the sagas follow a literary agenda with different priorities. The silence about medical issues of all sorts is broadly comparable to the lack of verbalised expressions of emotions, as Sif Ríkharðsdóttir details in her *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*.[34] Sif's close readings demonstrate that the sagas tend to transpose verbal expressions of emotions by transferring them into dramatic action. In view of the narrative silence regarding impairments, it may well be that the sagas choose to convey their concern for dis/ability in ways other than descriptions.

Regarding dis/ability, the previous discussion of the episode in *Eyrbyggja saga* suggests that four main aspects constitute the conspicuous narrative silence. First, the injured often refrain from pointing out their wounds, while the narrative itself pays little to no attention to the medi-

34 Sif Ríkharðsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature: Translations, Voices, Contexts*, Studies in Old Norse Literature 1 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), 57.

cal treatment of their injuries and impairments. Second, there is a paucity of emotional response to injuries from both the impaired persons and society at large. Third, the potential medical and social consequences of injuries and impairments are not openly addressed. Fourth, the saga does not return to previous cases of injuries and impairment, but rather moves on after incidents leading to dis/ability. At this point, of course, these four aspects could only be thought of as tendencies; whether they apply more generally within the corpus of the *Íslendingasögur* will require further refinement on the basis of exhaustive and detailed discussions well beyond the scope of this article. Yet they are useful here as a brief sketch of some key ways in which saga narratives are generally silent when it comes to matters of injuries and impairments.

The episode from *Eyrbyggja saga* depicts neither the injured characters nor the community as paying attention to wounds, to the extent that such impairments seem to go entirely unnoticed. The Þorbrandssynir only seem to acknowledge publicly their injuries when they experience difficulties with everyday actions; otherwise, it suffices for the narrator to mention their injuries in passing by employing stereotypical and unspecific formulations and terms.[35] In a fight against a group of the Norwegian king's followers, Egill Skallagrímsson receives multiple wounds that are described in a rather superficial manner, with the saga saying of him only that he had 'mǫrg sár ok engi stór'[36] [many wounds, but no serious (literally 'big') ones]. It is similarly said of the eponymous protagonist of *Þórðar saga hreðu* that he 'hafði fengit mörg sár ok stór'[37] [had received many serious wounds] from a fight against three attackers. Yet neither Egill nor Þórðr is fated to die at this point in his saga, and there is presumably no narrative benefit to be gained in being more specific about their injuries.

Of course, there are exceptions to this general tendency, as in the case of Auðr, the wife of Þórarinn svarti Þórólfsson, in *Eyrbyggja saga*. When Auðr tries to separate two groups in battle, her hand is cut off, perhaps accidentally; Þórarinn notices the incident only after the attackers have

35 It can often be observed that those wounds that either do not cause a character to become *óvígr* 'unable to fight' or that prove fatal often remain unspecified in the *Íslendingasögur*.

36 *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Íslenzk fornrit 2 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1933, repr. 2012), 237.

37 *Þórðar saga hreðu*, in *Kjalnesinga saga*, ed. by Jóhannes Halldórsson, Íslenzk fornrit 14 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag 1959, repr. 2007), 197.

left the farm and he sees a woman's hand lying in the yard. Þórarinn looks for his wife and finds her lying in bed; she does not positively confirm his suspicion that it is she who lost the hand, but merely asks him not to worry about her ('Auðr bað hann ekki um þat hirða,'[38] [Auðr asked him to pay no mind to it]). Her behaviour is a sure sign for her husband that it is her hand that he found in the yard, however, and he rushes off to pursue the attackers in order to avenge Auðr's impairment. While Auðr plays her injury down, potentially to stop Þórarinn from any further actions, it seems that Auðr's impairment is ultimately less disturbing for Þórarinn than the potential social damage that he and his wife experience because of the incident. This reading is reinforced later on when rumours spread that Þórarinn himself cut off Auðr's hand, a claim later disproven, which suggests the damage to one's reputation that could emerge from such situations if not dealt with quickly.

In all the aforementioned cases, the sagas remain silent as to how wounds are taken care of, how long the injured take to recover, and, even more importantly, how they feel after having been injured, as well as the impacts that injuries and impairments have on everyday life. Despite potentially serious and life-changing consequences arising from injuries and impairments, the *Íslendingasögur* refrain from assuming the perspectives of the impaired. The narratives display little to no interest in the well-being of individual characters or how they deal with the medical issues and consequences of their physical ailments, and personal experience is given less importance than the social implications – that is, the disability that can be caused by the impairment.[39]

The silence is also underlined by the lack of the patient perspectives and saga characters who do not express or complain about physical discomfort or pain even when they have ample reason for doing so, at least from a modern perspective. As Stefan Buntrock puts it, 'man würde in diesem Umfeld [der altnordischen Sagaliteratur] nur allzu selbstverständlich erwarten, dem Thema Schmerz auf Schritt und Tritt zu begegnen. Doch die

38 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 36.

39 One of the few cases in which an impaired person's perspective is shown in the sagas is that of Önundr tréfótr in *Grettis saga*. For an excellent analysis of this character, see Sexton, "Difference and Disability."

Rolle des Schmerzes ist in diesen Texten alles andere als offensichtlich'[40] [In this context (of Old Norse saga literature) it would only be natural to expect a continuous confrontation with the topic of pain. The role of pain in these texts, however, is anything but straightforward].[41] Buntrock adds that this approach to injury and pain can be considered a generic feature of the *Íslendingasögur*, and thus represents a community's particular attitude and expectation towards health and the (unblemished) body.[42]

At the same time, references to healing and recovery are repeatedly made, although as with descriptions of injuries such instances offer only minimal information. In such contexts, sagas often resort to generalised, formulaic descriptions of healing, as in the following examples: 'Þormóðr bindr sár sitt'[43] [Þormóðr binds up his wounds]; 'Álfgerðr batt sár hans (Gríms)'[44] [Álfgerðr bound up his (Grímr's) wounds]; 'Þeir létu grœða sjúka menn'[45] [They had the sick men healed]; 'Þat er frá Þorsteini at segja, at honum batnaði'[46] [It is to be reported about Þorsteinn that he recovered].

Although *Egils saga* portrays Egill very often as a ruthless warrior, he also repeatedly assumes the role of a healer and a leader concerned about the well-being of his followers.[47] On his third trip to Norway, the topic

40 Stefan Buntrock, *'Und es schrie aus den Wunden': Untersuchung zum Schmerzphänomen und der Sprache des Schmerzes in den Íslendinga-, Konunga-, Byskupasögur sowie der Sturlunga saga*, Münchner Nordische Studien 2 (München: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2009), 19.

41 According to Buntrock, the only *Íslendingasaga* that features a cry of pain is *Eiríks saga rauða* ("Schmerzphänomen," 255–257). In some of the manuscripts, Eiríkr shouts 'ái, ái' in direct speech when he falls off his horse ("Schmerzphänomen," 256). This reading has been debated, however, because the passage is difficult to decipher due to the poor condition of the manuscript.

42 Buntrock, "Schmerzphänomen," 140.

43 *Fóstbrœðra saga*, in *Vestfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943), 251.

44 *Droplaugarsona saga*, in *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), 166. By referring to Álfgerðr in this episode as *Álfgerðr læknir* 'Álfgerðr the physician,' *Droplaugarsona saga* underlines that she is medically skilled.

45 *Egils saga*, 55.

46 *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, in *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk fornrit 11 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), 11.

47 This observation strongly contrasts with Ármann Jakobsson's persuasive argument that Egill lacks empathy and that his behaviour is motivated by egoism (Ármann Jakobsson, "*Egils saga* and Empathy: Emotions and Moral Issues in a Dysfunctional Saga Family," *Scandinavian Studies* 80 (1) (2008): 17). I do not intend to discuss at this point whether Egill could be called a healer or a physician, not least as the saga does not refer to him as

of healing appears first when Egill and his men visit the farmer Þorfinnr in Eiðaskógr. During dinner, Egill notices a 'kona sjúk'[48] [sick woman]. It turns out that she is Þorfinnr's daughter Helga, who has been afflicted by *vanmáttr* ('failing strength, illness')[49] for quite some time. Egill cures her by carving a rune stick, and Helga, though still frail, soon seems to be revived: 'Henni þótti sem hon vaknaði ór svefni'[50] [It seemed to her that she had woken up from sleep]. Egill and his men continue their journey, but are soon worn and wounded after several fights. In spite of his own wounds, Egill primarily takes care of his men: 'Hann batt sár fǫrunauta sinna'[51] [He bound up the wounds of his companions]. On their way back, they stay twice with farmers, and in each location their wounds are again taken care of. When the men eventually return to Þorfinnr's, Helga is up and well again: 'Helga, dóttir bónda, var þá á fótum ok heil meina sinna'[52] [Helga, the farmer's daughter, was up again and her health was restored]. Regardless of the gendered aspects of this episode, it is unusual for saga narratives to turn back to a previous incident of sickness and healing. In light of the fact that Helga and her family do not appear again in the saga, the emphasis on Egill's healing of Helga stands out, thereby illustrating an unexpected aspect of his character.

In contrast to how little attention is paid to wounds and impairments when they are inflicted, references to healing and recovery are surprisingly numerous.[53] As discussed below in more detail, this disparity suggests that healing and recovering were key issues for saga society as regards the maintenance of social equilibrium. Assuming a historical perspective, Cordula

a *læknir* ('physician'). In some *Íslendingasögur*, references to *læknar* are made, as occurs in *Droplaugarsona saga* (see the above footnote regarding Álfgerðr læknir) and in *Fóstbræðra saga*, especially in the Hauksbók version, which is notably interested in physiology and medical concepts.

48 *Egils saga*, 229.

49 Zoëga, "Dictionary," 470.

50 *Egils saga*, 230.

51 *Egils saga*, 237.

52 *Egils saga*, 238.

53 This observation is made on the basis of a database previously compiled in the context of the project *Disability before Disability*; however, there are currently no plans to publish this database. To summarise the basis of this assertion: The software Atlas.ti was used to tag dis/ability-related aspects in the *Íslendingasögur*, and in the sixteen sagas that were tagged, 56 instances of impairment were found in contrast to 53 instances of healing and recovery. In both cases, instances were tagged only if they related to named saga characters.

Nolte emphasises that irrespective of a person's social standing physical and mental conditions affected an individual's life as well as a community at large[54] This applies also to Old Norse saga society, which depends on individuals who are able-bodied, can provide for their family, and, most importantly, can protect their own and their family's honour, for maintenance of its social structure.[55] The notion of able-bodiedness, however, is not restricted to unblemished bodies, but connected to the concept of *utilitas* – that is, of being useful for the community and not depending on others for a living.[56] It is at this juncture that it will therefore be useful to introduce Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital and consider the body's role in accruing symbolic capital in saga society.

5. The Body as Capital

Regardless of the extent to which the verbalised emotional response to injuries and impairments may appear limited in scope, dis/ability does not go unnoticed in the sagas. Concerns about embodied difference and reactions to it, such as empathy and compassion, often translate into feelings of honour and shame and thus surface repeatedly in connection to juridical negotiations. In light of this, it is important to consider why both saga narratives and saga society pay close attention to arbitrations and legal considerations after fights and feuds, and the role that impaired bodies play in these negotiations. After all, many a fight is brought to a close by comparing the numbers of wounded and killed men on both sides in order to make sure that the parties involved have suffered comparable losses.[57]

54 Cordula Nolte, introduction to *Homo debilis: Behinderte – Kranke – Versehrte in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, ed. by Cordula Nolte, Studien und Texte zur Geistes- und Sozialgeschichte des Mittelalters 3. (Korb: Didymos Verlag, 2009), 18.

55 Buntrock, "Schmerzphänomen," 235.

56 Cordula Nolte, "Funktionsfähigkeit, Nützlichkeit, Tauglichkeit: Was in Vormodernen Leistungsgesellschaften zählte," *Dis/ability History der Vormoderne: ein Handbuch. Premodern Dis/ability History: A Companion*, edited by Cordula Nolte, Bianca Frohne, Uta Halle and Sonja Kerth (Affalterbach: Didymos, 2017), 170–172.

57 In the Konungsbók version of *Grágás* (Gks 1157 fol.), the section on *vígslóði* 'treatment of homicide' offers a variety of homicide scenarios, definitions of wounds and details as to how such incidents should be punished and what rights and duties the parties involved have; see *Laws of Early Iceland. Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from other Manuscripts*, transl. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 139–174. Both on a historical and a literary level,

In case of an imbalance, monetary compensation is paid. At times, these negotiations give rise to the impression that wounds, injuries, and cases of homicide are traded as if they were detached and inanimate objects that can be exchanged to re-establish the social balance. The parties involved are remarkably accurate and thorough when it comes to the comparison of losses, despite so little narrative attention being given to details of injuries.

Saga society's accuracy in these specific moments of peace negotiations strongly contrasts with the ostensible indifference generally shown to dis/ability by saga narratives and saga society. It is only in these negotiations that saga society reveals its concern for individual able-bodiedness and shows that cases of wounds and impairments are taken seriously and do not simply fall under the idea of 'collateral damage'. Indeed, injuries and impairments could cause severe disruptions to a (small) community because of the potential sources of social stigma and hence the sagas choose to deal with losses and impairments on a juridical level. Negotiations for compensation, whilst focused on pecuniary aspects, are part of a wider process that attempts to restore social balance and satisfy a sense of justice. In this way, the sagas do not break their silence about dis/ability completely but point to the importance of able-bodiedness for the maintenance of social structures and the reputations of individuals and their families.

I suggest that the body can therefore be thought of as a form of capital in the *Íslendingasögur* in line with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capitals.[58] Bourdieu suggests a model of four types of capital that expands considerably on the conven-

punishment is also executed with the help of physical mutilations depending on the severity of a legal trespass; see, for example, *Egils saga*, 9–12. Given the importance of being able-bodied, being physically punished would represent a severe encroachment on the capital of an individual in jeopardising their potential to accrue and to demonstrate physical abilities, social reputation, and economic standing. What is more, the scars or missing limbs would stand as lasting outward reminders of past events, both for the individual and for wider society. On the use of physical punishment in medieval English and Old Norse legal and literary sources, see Sean Lawing, "Perspectives on Disfigurement in Medieval Iceland: A Cultural Study Based on Old Norse Laws and Icelandic Sagas" (Doctoral thesis, Háskóli Íslands, 2016).

58 On the general applicability of Bourdieu's theory of capitals onto Old Norse literature, see Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); and Torfi H. Tulinius, "Pierre Bourdieu and Snorri Sturluson: Chieftains, Sociology and the Development of Literature in Medieval Iceland?" *Snorres Edda i europeisk og islandsk kultur*, ed. by Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (Reykholt: Snorrastofa, 2009), 47–70.

tional understanding of capital as being constituted predominantly or exclusively by financial means, or *economic capital*.[59] In addition, Bourdieu introduces the concepts of *social capital*, *cultural capital*, and *symbolic capital*. Social capital encompasses the resources gained by individuals as a result of their participation in various social groups and networks.[60] Cultural capital entails education and other acquired skills and how they are put to use; because the individual incorporates these skills, so to speak, they tend to seem as natural as character traits.[61] Symbolic capital refers to the reputation and respect gained from demonstrating one's access to the three previously mentioned forms of capital. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the idea that all four capitals can be traded with and transferred into one another in order to accumulate wealth and to advance one's social standing and reputation. His approach is therefore flexible, allowing for the various forms of capital to be adapted to a wide variety of historical and social situations.

Even though Bourdieu does not explicitly define the body as being a (major) part of a specific form of capital,[62] the importance and meaning of the body in the creation and movement of capital cannot be denied, neither on a general level nor as regards Old Norse literature in particular. It is reasonable to suggest that physical integrity and able-bodiedness are crucial factors for success in saga society. In this context, the body is best understood as a highly valuable form of capital that must be preserved in order to thrive in a society in which reputation and social stature are fundamentally dependent on physical prowess. The body

59 See Pierre Bourdieu, "Ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital," *Soziale Ungleichheiten*, ed. by Reinhard Kreckel, Soziale Welt, Sonderband 2 (Göttingen: O. Schwartz, 1983), and *Language and Symbolic Power,* ed. and introduced by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1983). My understanding of Bourdieu's theory of capital is heavily influenced by the work of Joseph Jurt.

60 Joseph Jurt, "Bourdieu," *Grundwissen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Philip Reclam jun, 2008), 77.

61 Jurt, "Bourdieu," 73.

62 Catherine Hakim suggests *erotic capital* as a fifth capital in the context of modern society, arguing that especially women have the possibility to make use of their physical appearance in order to achieve their goals, both in relation to the job market and in private. While it is certainly useful to emphasise the importance of the body as an asset, it is limiting to reduce the body's potential for capital to erotic components. Hakim's discussion could benefit by considering the body as a neutral entity with many potential functions in relation to different forms of capital, rather than as a limited form of capital that mostly applies to Western European heterosexual women (Catherine Hakim, "Erotic Capital," *European Sociological Review* 26.5 (2010): 499–518).

is part of social capital in the role it plays in establishing family connections and friendships, and also in how it is used in the context of animosities and fights; it expresses cultural capital when saga characters make use of their (legal) learnedness and their physical prowess in fighting; and it can be understood through the concept of symbolic capital in as much as the body is a means for accumulating and representing social standards and is thus crucial for determining the honour and reputation of an individual or their family. To come full circle, the body, or rather the blemished body, also translates into pecuniary worth – in other words, economic capital – when agreements are made and compensations paid out depending on specific types of injury and the social positions of the individuals involved.

The juridical aftermath of the feud between the Þorbrandssynir and the Þorlákssynir stretches over almost a whole chapter of *Eyrbyggja saga* (ch. 46) and involves a detailed account of the negotiations of the compensations. While some of the serious wounds and killings are considered to be equivalent, other incidents are not compared in a one-to-one ratio, neither with regard to the injuries nor the (number of) people involved.[63] In the course of these negotiations, Þorleifr kimbi experiences the greatest overall loss of capital, in all forms, from the animosities: he has a burn on his neck, his marriage proposal is refused, he receives an impairment, and he is even fined for his lost leg.

6. Narrative Prosthesis

Although the saga does not subsequently comment on Þorleifr kimbi's prosthesis, which replaces his lost leg, it stands as a silent reminder of the defeat that he experienced in his dealings with the Þorlákssynir. In contrast to saga figures such as Önundr tréfótr (*Grettis saga*), Þórir viðleggr, and Þórólfr bægifótr (both *Eyrbyggja saga*), however, Þorleifr kimbi does not receive a new or additional nickname that highlights his impairment and reminds of an unpleasant incident. By choosing to give people revealing nicknames, the typical saga silence towards dis/ability is broken in an exceptionally restrained way: Whilst a nickname can acknowledge an embodied difference, it is not itself a guarantee that the story behind the impairment will be narrated. Hence, it is often the case that the narrative silence about an impairment extends to its robbing the individual of a biographically crucial

63 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 131–132.

story even in the process of highlighting the existence of the impairment itself. As I argue below, the traumatic aspects of such cases of dis/ability may even make it impossible to narrate such stories in the first place.

As mentioned above, juridical negotiations and arbitrations tend to centre on the (unblemished) body. Besides their capability for restoring the social equilibrium, such negotiations are a means of making both communal relationships and individual bodies appear whole and undamaged – or at least not distinctively damaged – through the tallying up of certain injuries as equivalent and the prescription of financial compensation for outstanding impairments without apparent equivalence. This pretence at effacing the damage caused is, of course, an illusion. No financial compensation could reverse the physical damage caused by cases of killings and dis/ability. Yet such compensation can be read as a form of prosthesis, in the sense that it attempts to create a substitute for the aspect of the body damaged or displaced by the conflict so as to downplay the embodied difference signalled by its presence.

This process has notable similarities to the concept of narrative prosthesis developed primarily by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder. Following on the symbolic aspect of the material prosthesis, Mitchell and Snyder suggest that certain narrative elements can be used to cover up instances of dis/ability, thereby making them acceptable to a specific society and its perception of 'normal', in similar ways to the use of material prostheses. It is worth emphasising that narrative prosthesis is neither a specific narrative mode nor a particular use of language; rather, identifying its use involves the in-depth analysis of how narratives deal more broadly with experiences and representations of dis/ability, as well as the tracing of narrative devices that are in fact unsuccessful in deceiving a reader or an audience in regard to dis/ability. As Mitchell and Snyder put it, '*Narrative Prosthesis* is first and foremost about the ways in which the ruse of prosthesis fails in its primary objective: to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence'.[64] Tracing and decoding the use of narrative prosthesis thus allows for a better understanding of a given community's notion of and their literary response to dis/ability. No matter the extent to which a society attempts to silence the public discourse on dis/ability, such discourse always resurfaces, forcing society to take seriously the topic and the concerns of those it affects and to deal with them adequately.[65]

64 Mitchell and Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis," 8.

65 Mitchell and Snyder, "Narrative Prosthesis," 49. On comparable confrontations that society

It is therefore worth considering whether negotiations for compensations after fights in the *Íslendingasögur* are best understood as manifestations of narrative prostheses, given their ostensible purpose of making up for a physical loss or a killing, through which the members of saga society attempt to restore a former condition that cannot be fully recovered. In Bourdieu's terms, the paying out of such compensations is a transfer of capital across different forms, as physical and especially social and symbolic forms of capital are turned into economic capital – the only form of capital that the offending party can return to the aggrieved party and that is of some use to them, albeit not one that provides any substantial emotional or physical redress. From a narratological perspective, the payment of compensation acts as a narrative prosthesis because it shifts the focus of attention away from the discomfort and loss caused by the presence of dis/ability, and instead emphasises – or at least attempts to emphasise – that the pending case has come to a close with the final payment.

The narrative silence continues, however, in the sense that the *Íslendingasögur* generally do not revisit cases of dis/ability and show little interest in a saga character's well-being or dis/ability later in life. Indeed, many characters who experience traumatic physical injuries either vanish from the saga narrative or, if they make another appearance, the texts do not make any further reference to their previous injury or impairment. Apparently, dis/ability is out of sight and out of mind once a juridical agreement has been accepted, and all parties involved have little choice other than to accept the situation. Even in the case of saga characters whose nickname reveals their impairment, the impairment itself is in most cases not relevant for the plot.

Hence, the Þorbrandssynir vanish from *Eyrbyggja saga* shortly after their stay at Helgafell, with Þorleifr kimbi and Snorri dropping out of the story a few chapters later. Both move to Greenland, with Snorri eventually sailing to Vínland where he dies in a battle against the *skrælingjar*, the native inhabitants. Þóroddr stays in Iceland and makes another appearance in the last chapters of the saga in fighting the monstrous bull Glæsir, but not even in this last stand does the saga point to the injuries that Þóroddr suffered earlier in the narrative. Auðr also disappears from the text a few chapters

has with representatives of monstrosity and alterity, see Rebecca Merkelbach, *Monsters in Society: Alterity, Transgression, and the Use of the Past in Medieval Iceland*, The Northern Medieval World: On the Margins of Europe (Kalamazoo / Berlin: Medieval Institute Publications / Walter de Gruyter, 2019).

after her hand is cut off; it is not clear whether she accompanies her husband Þórarinn svarti when he is made to leave Iceland, but in any case her impairment is not mentioned again.

7. The Silenced Trauma

The manifest silence of the *Íslendingasögur* regarding injuries and dis/ability can also be interpreted on a psychological level as a manifestation of trauma.[66] The term *trauma* as used in modern psychology is ambiguous in as much as it refers to three different aspects of traumatic experiences: first, a disturbing event that causes a psychic response; second, the emotional shock that the event causes; and third, the psychosomatic impact that this experience has on a person.[67] Trauma theory conceptualises life as a continuous narrative and suggests that it is possible to process and verbally narrate most of our experiences in life as such. In the case of a traumatic experience, however, the individual is overwhelmed by the sudden emotional intensity of an incident and does not have the necessary mental capacities to deal with the situation adequately. Being caught off guard by an unsettling event, individuals can find themselves unable to put into words their experience, and hence often resort to silence. To verbalise the experience and transform it into a stringent narrative proves painful and difficult, even impossible in some cases. Thus, trauma evades the individual's control and remains in a state of fragmentary, non-verbalised memory, which hinders the individual in coming to terms with the traumatising incident: it cannot be defused and integrated into the continuous biographical narrative of the patient's life, leaving them to be haunted by it.[68]

66 On the value of psychological approaches to Old Norse saga literature, see Ármann Jakobsson, "Empathy." On the application of the trauma framework to the *Íslendingasögur*, see Torfi H. Tulinius "Honour, Sagas and Trauma: Reflection on Literature and Violence in 13th Century Iceland," *Literature and Honour*, ed. by Aasta Marie Bjorvand Bjørkøy and Thorstein Norheim (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2017), 81–94, and "Skaði kennir mér minni minn: On the Relationship Between Trauma, Memory, Revenge and the Medium of Poetry," *Skandinavische Schriflandschaften. Vänbok till Jürg Glauser*, ed. by Klaus Müller-Wille, Kate Heslop, Anna Katharina Richter, and Lukas Rösli (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2017), 129–135.

67 Donna Trembinski, "Comparing Premodern Melancholy/Mania and Modern Trauma: An Argument in Favor of Historical Experiences of Trauma," *History of Psychology* 14.1 (2011): 82.

68 Fabian Hutmacher, "Vom Unsagbaren sprechen. Trauma in Psychologie und Literatur am

In the context of a general discussion on whether it is advisable to apply modern terms and concepts from psychology to premodern contexts, it has been contested in particular whether trauma as a modern concept can be sensitively applied to premodern sources. As Donna Trembinski shows, a consensus on this issue is still lacking as most scholars working on this topic take either a strong pro or contra stance.[69] While proponents of reading trauma in premodern sources argue that it is possible to identify transhistorically comparable psychological and mental reactions to traumatising experiences, their opponents insist that the nature of trauma as a modern, Western-European concept is not a suitable analytical category for premodern sources.[70] As regards the use of the term trauma in this article, I follow Wendy Turner and Christina Lee, who claim that even though there was no comparatively uniform understanding of trauma in premodern societies as there is in our contemporary world, traumatic experiences themselves must have existed;[71] and Donna Trembinski,[72] who suggests that trauma can be a useful category of analysis if we acknowledge that its potential meanings and depictions of it are dependent on its historical and cultural context.[73] Trauma as an analytical tool thus goes beyond the medical and diagnostic aspects of the term, historically contingent on modern understandings of medicine, to encompass the broader socio-cultural aspects of individual and collective traumatic experiences.[74]

Beispiel Paul Celans," *The German Quarterly* 92 (3) (2019): 329. Along with the unsettling details of the traumatic experience – for example, of an accident or being held hostage – another difficult aspect for many traumatised people is being confronted with the question of, why they specifically survived the event (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7, 60, and 65). The growing awareness of what could have gone wrong and how close they were to death's door is often the most traumatising feature.

69 Trembinski, "Melancholy" and idem, "Trauma as a Category of Analysis?" *Trauma in Medieval Society*, ed. by Wendy J. Turner and Christina Lee, Explorations in Medieval Culture 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 13–32.

70 Trembinski, "Melancholy," 80–81.

71 Wendy J. Turner. and Christina Lee, "Conceptualizing Trauma for the Middle Ages," *Trauma in Medieval Society*, ed. by Wendy J. Turner and Christina Lee, Explorations in Medieval Culture 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 8.

72 Trembinski, "Trauma," esp. 14, 21, and 26.

73 See Trembinski's discussion of the premodern concepts of melancholia and mania that feature some similarities to the modern notion of trauma ("Melancholy," 87–93).

74 On the difference between (individual) psychological trauma and (collective) cultural trauma, see Neil J. Smelser, "Psychological Trauma and Cultural Trauma," *Cultural Trauma*

Even though (individual) physical causes for traumas may have remained unchanged over time, the psychological damage they cause is likely to have changed depending on the various 'emotional and cultural experiences of the individual'.[75] Along with categories such as gender, race, religion, and – in the present case – dis/ability, trauma offers an additional approach for analysing processes of othering and of (embodied) difference.[76]

Similar to dis/ability, trauma as a methodological tool can be used to explore depictions of differences related to body and mind, as well as the ways in which both individuals and society deal with such (embodied) difference. In a literary context, 'trauma narratives' can be understood as a 'narratological phenomenon'[77] focused on painful and disturbing events and their aftermath, which aims at finding a way of dealing with and ideally coming to terms with a trauma. In the same way that there is no universal definition of trauma applicable to premodern sources, trauma narratives do not feature uniform narrative patterns, but require distinct readings and interpretation.[78] Nevertheless, Trembinski suggests that such stories may have common features, such as '[n]arrative disjunctures, disordered prose, formulaic language or metaphors,'[79] that reflect the fragmented recollections of the event and figure as the only way of (temporarily) verbalising a traumatic experience. The substance of the traumatic experience will of course be specific to the historical context of the society that produced the narrative, and it is worth keeping in mind Turner and Lee's emphasis on the importance of identifying what aspects the sources are specifically silent about, which is very much the aim of this article.[80]

and Collective Identity, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Pitor Sztompka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 31–59.

75 Trembinski, "Trauma," 16.

76 Trembinski, "Trauma," 29–30; Sonja Kerth, "Narratives of Trauma in Medieval German Literature," *Trauma in Medieval Society*, ed. by Wendy J. Turner and Christina Lee, Explorations in Medieval Culture 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 276. On 'other(-ing)' see e.g. Jean-François Staszak, "Other/otherness," *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, ed. by Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2008), 43–47. For a very recent discussion of 'other(ing)' in Old Norse-Icelandic literature, see Merkelbach, "Monsters," esp. 11–15, 26–28.

77 Kerth, "Narratives of Trauma," 279.

78 See e.g. Trembinski, "Melancholy," 85–86, and "Trauma," 22–29; and Kerth, "Narratives of Trauma," 281–296.

79 Trembinski, "Trauma," 21.

80 Turner and Lee, "Conceptualizing Trauma," 12.

Several aspects that trauma theory posits as characteristic of traumas can be identified in the *Íslendingasögur*. While the sagas allow audiences a level of insight into the legal discussions and juridical decisions concerning arbitrations and compensation payments, they do not give much attention to the physical and mental implications of fights. Instead, audiences are presented with short, fragmentary descriptions of injuries and impairments rather than with a coherent narrative. The sagas hardly ever offer a glimpse of how saga characters supposedly feel after having suffered an injury or impairment, more often the narratives make do with famously succinct phrases that reveal little more than brief details of what a character has been through. Typical sentences in this context include the following: 'Þá lét Gyrðr auga sitt'[81] [Then Gyrðr lost his eye]. '[Þormóðr] var jafnan ǫrvendr síðan, meðan hann lifði'[82] [from then on (Þormóðr) was left-handed as long as he lived]; 'ok varð Helgi Ásbjarnarson þegar óvígr'[83] [and Helgi Ásbjarnarson immediately became unable to fight (or: dis/abled)]; and 'Gunnarr hjó hǫnd af Óttari í ǫlbogabót'[84] [Gunnarr cut off Óttarr's lower arm at the elbow]. In these sentences, the characters involved suffer serious injuries that bring about crucial changes to how they experience their lives, and which in some cases lead to dis/ability, yet such consequences are addressed in detail neither when the incidents happen nor in later narration. I suggest that this is because such experiences represent too severe a blow, both for the individual and their community, for them to discuss at length.

The characters and the narrators of the sagas thus resort to a fragmented silence on the matter, in which they are unable to embed the traumatic experience into a narrative. What remains are the scars, the missing limbs, the compensation payments, and the nicknames that stand as constant reminders of what happened, but that do not allow for individuals or society itself to verbalise a narrative that could break the pervasive silence.

81 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 176.

82 *Fóstbræðra saga*, 167.

83 *Droplaugarsona saga*, 162–163.

84 *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit 12 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1945, repr. 2010), 159.

8. Conclusion

This discussion has shown that the silence of the *Íslendingasögur* towards the topic of injury and dis/ability is by no means impenetrable, even though the sagas neither elaborate on this topic nor tend to focus on impaired characters. When discussing fighting, the sagas refrain from dwelling at length on descriptions of the injuries and non-congenital impairments caused by violent encounters; it is only in the course of negotiating peace agreements and compensation payments that any medical issues are listed, but without any verbalised emotional or empathic responses regarding either the impairments themselves or the impaired individuals. The sagas therefore appear markedly indifferent towards such crucial life-changes, but this apparent indifference need not equate to apathy.

Considering the precision and strictness with which peace agreements are conducted in the *Íslendingsögur*, it is evident that the body is of utmost importance to saga society, especially as regards being able-bodied. Both the individual and the community at large depend on the bodily prowess of individuals, particularly men, to provide for the household materially and to uphold family honour and reputation. Becoming injured, or worse, becoming *óvígr* ('unable to fight, disabled'),[85] is therefore a serious issue reflected in the severity of punishment for those who cause such injuries and the amount they have to pay as compensation. The importance of the body, or more precisely of being able-bodied, is thus highlighted in the sagas. The body is, in Bourdieu's terms, a valuable form of capital that can be translated into considerable sums of money. Furthermore, the body is an asset for trading both for the individual and for society: during compensation negotiations, society as a whole makes use of the individual's body and its impairments as a means to resolve disputes and re-establish societal equilibrium. Yet as soon as the sentence is passed and the payment is made, the individual is left alone with the impairment and the potential trauma associated with it. Society's interest in the injury or impairment stops when the incident is considered avenged and the social equilibrium is restored. The sagas are not especially interested in how impaired saga characters feel about this *quid pro quo* as they hardly every render individual perspectives. In light of Mitchell and Snyder's theory, it seems reasonable

85 Zoëga, "Dictionary," 466 *úvígr*.

to conclude that the peace agreements during the aftermath of animosities therefore qualify as a kind of narrative prosthesis, because they reinforce a pretence that nothing of lasting significance has happened – or at least nothing significant enough that it could not be compensated with money.

Based on the psychological premise that life is a continuous narrative that is disrupted by traumatic experiences which cannot be verbalised, it is reasonable to consider whether saga society itself is too traumatised to discuss such dramatic experiences of dis/ability. The sagas mostly resort to brief statements that record the more factual aspects of dis/ability, fragmentary details that remain isolated and are not turned into a cohesive narrative strand. I have argued that the reason for this silence, which necessitates a narrative prosthesis, may lie in the potential damage that could be done to one's social standing because of one's potential dis/ability and the dependence on others that it can engender. This threat is especially pressing in saga society, which attributes great importance to the notion of honour – that is, the need to maintain one's symbolic capital, and the anxieties that go along with that of losing such capital through the loss of one's able-bodiedness.

It goes without saying that the discussion of dis/ability, trauma, and narrative prosthesis in the Old Norse saga literature calls for further research, both regarding the *Íslendingasögur* and other literary genres. Furthermore, it is an enticing prospect to follow up this research by investigating the question of whether, and to what extent, the individual traumatic experiences of saga characters – that is, instances of psychological trauma – may relate to potential communal traumas more deeply rooted in historical Icelandic society and the literature it produced – that is, a kind of cultural trauma. It may be revealing to consider the corpus of *Sturlunga saga* for further research on this particular aspect, given the temporal closeness of the narrative material to the historical individuals who compiled it.

At this stage, however, it should be clear that by reading the *Íslendingasögur* through the lens of traumatology, as well as by applying to the texts the conceptual frameworks of narrative prosthesis and Bourdieu's theories of capital, we can open up new perspectives in regard to dis/ability itself and the social perception and response to this multi-faceted topic. This article has demonstrated how such concepts are useful for unlocking the os-

tensibly nondescript nature and characteristic silence of the *Íslendingasögur* towards embodied difference, and has suggested that even this silence itself may be best understood not simply as a quirk of the corpus, but as representing a form of long-standing trauma.

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ABSTRACT

The Silenced Trauma in the *Íslendingasögur*

Keywords: disability, impairment, narrative prosthesis, trauma, *Íslendingasögur*

Although the *Íslendingasögur* feature countless episodes with saga characters who are wounded and impaired in martial encounters, the sagas are remarkably silent on these (physical) traumas. Indeed, in most cases such injuries and impairments are addressed only in succinct comments, if at all. Nonetheless, longer-term consequences such as dis/ability and social stigma can seriously jeopardise a character's social standing and reputation (i.e. Bourdieu's symbolic capital). Although peace negotiations and compensation payments (i.e. Bourdieu's economic capital) can attempt to restore this imbalance and the social equilibrium more broadly, they cannot relieve a saga character of the experienced trauma. Hence, the trauma keeps evading narrativization, a process mirrored in the narrative prosthesis of the sagas' silence. It is thus argued that narrative silence has deeply personal implications for the individuals concerned and is potentially an expression of a trauma. In order to penetrate this 'silence of the limbs', the article draws on four interlinked methodological approaches that allow for a fruitful interpreting of the taciturnity of the sagas. Starting from the perspective of dis/ability history, the article draws on the key concepts of narrative prosthesis, as articulated by Mitchell and Snyder (2003); Pierre Bourdieu's notion of capital; and trauma theory.

ÁGRIP

Þaggaður skaði í Íslendingasögum

Lykilorð: fötlun, skerðing, frásagnarfræðilegur gervilimur, tráma, Íslendingasögur

Þrátt fyrir fjölda frásagna í Íslendingasögunum af bardögum sem leiða til líkamlegra áverka og skerðinga, er það athyglisvert hversu þöglar Íslendingasögurnar eru um afleiðingar áverkanna. Þá sjaldan sem slíkar afleiðingar eru nefndar er það í fáum orðum. Þrátt fyrir fá og stuttaraleg dæmi eru líkamlegar skerðingar og félagslegar afleiðingar þeirra á líf sögupersónanna þó áberandi sem og áhrif fötlunar á sæmd og heiður (áhrif á menningarlegt auðmagn í anda Bourdieu). Sættir og fébætur sem eiga að leiða til nýs jafnvægis í átt að aukinni sæmd til handa sögupersónunni koma ekki í staðinn fyrir áfallið og lífsreynsluna sem því fylgir. Segja má að áfallið sjálft sé á sífelldu undanhaldi eða á flótta undan frásögninni en endurspeglast um leið í þögninni sem styður framvindu sögunnar. Hér er því haldið fram að þögn Íslendingasagnanna sé birtingarmynd hins persónulega áfalls.

Þessu til rökstuðnings er þögnin rannsökuð með fjórum samhangandi fræðilegum aðferðum til að draga fram hina kerfisbundnu valþögli sagnanna. Í anda fötlunarfræða eru sögurnar greindar út frá hugtakinu „frásagnarfræðilegur gervilimur“ (e. *narrative prosthesis*) sem Mitchell and Snyder settu fram árið 2003 auk kenninga Pierre Bourdieu um áföll og auðmagn.

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