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Mythic Slaves and Mundane Gods:
A Study of Class Systems in the Poetic and Snorra Eddas

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Abstract

Servants and slaves have been overlooked all too frequently in critical readings of the Norse myths. Yet, lower ranking characters have not always been invisible to the tellers of tales. In the Eddic poems and the *Íslendingasögur*, people of lower status are not only present, but are active participants. In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, the well recognized Æsir and Jǫtnar often share, or entirely hand over, the narrative spotlight with characters of lower rank. Yet, despite their persistent presence these slaves, servants, and helpers remain unrecognized. This essay seeks to answer the question: what can be gained in taking the time to witness and recognize these characters?

Through the lens of class it is possible to see how the Eddas describe a fully functioning mythic world; a world which is just as alive and complex as that of the sagas. Comparative readings between the genres have much to teach both about the subjects of the myths, and about their audiences. By bringing attention to the presence of servants and slaves, one can understand more deeply mythic and mundane notions of power, the values and limitations of social rank, and the society of the mythic world.

Ágrip

Fræðimenn sem hugað hafa að norrænum goðsögnum hafa allt of oft litið framhjá þjónustufólki og þrælum sem þar er sagt frá. Þó hafa þeir sem sögðu þessar sögur ekki verið blindir fyrir persónum af lægri stigum. Í eddukvæðum og Íslendingasögum eru lægra settar persónur ekki bara sýnilegar heldur oft virkir gerendur í atburðarásinni. Eins má finna, bæði í eddukvæðum og Snorra Eddu, dæmi um að persónur af lægri stigum deili sviðinu með herra settum persónum og jafnvel taki það yfir. Þrátt fyrir þetta er oft litið framhjá þrælum, þjónustufólki og aðstoðarfólki í þessum textum. Í ritgerðinni er leitast við að svara því hvort einhver ávinningur geti verið að því að gefa þessum persónum meiri gaum.

Með því að beita hugtakinu stétt kemur í ljós að eddurnar lýsa goðsagnaheimi sem starfar samkvæmt innri lögmálum og er jafn lifandi og flókinn og sá heimur sem birtist í fornsögunum. Samanburður á ólíkum bókmenntategundum geta sagt mikið um bæði umfjöllunarefni goðsagnanna og um viðtakendur þeirra. Með því að beina sjónum að þjónustufólki og þrælum er unnt að skilja betur goðsögulegar og hversdaglegar hliðar á valdi, gildi og takmarkanir félagslegrar stöðu og samfélag hins goðsögulega heims.

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I. Introduction

History has often failed to remember the people who fed, clothed, and cared for all its grand characters; has had trouble taking time to describe the people who rose each day not to lead armies but to cut hay, bake bread, and milk cows. This same lack of attention is reflected in the study and interpretation of myth. All too frequently, characters of lower social rank and class are simply overlooked in critical readings. However, lower ranking characters have not always been invisible to the tellers of tales. Icelandic literature of the Early Middle Ages is full of servants and slaves. In the Eddic poems and tales and the *Íslendingasögur*, characters of lower status are not only present, but are also active participants. Neither are these characters simply formulaic or scenic; instead, they often appear as people in full possession of voice, will, and skill. In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, the well recognized characters of the *Æsir* and *Jǫtnar*¹ often share, or entirely hand over, the narrative spotlight to characters of lower rank.

Despite their presence, these slaves, servants, and helpers remain unrecognized in modern scholarship. While this essay does not seek to answer why this is the case, it does ask the question: what can be gained in taking the time to witness and recognize these characters? Over the course of the following essay I shall examine servant and slave² characters in both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, and present a new reading of the Norse myths with an attention to class, if not classism. My aim in this study is to illuminate the ways in which awareness of the lower classes allows for new angles of study and conceptions of the mythic world. In particular, I shall look how the mythic world and Norse societies of the Viking and

¹ In most English texts on Norse mythology, *æsir* (sing. *áss*) and *vanir* are translated as gods while *jǫtnar* (sing. *jǫtunn*) is translated as giants. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these translations, the terms god and giant are rarely defined which has led to some over generalization of these characters “natures” based on modern conceptions of these terms. As such, in this paper the Old Norse words will be used for simplicity and in the hope that it will help to set aside ideas of good/evil, order/chaos that have been previously associated with these beings.

² Labels concerning class and status often bring stigmas and preconceived notions with them. In this essay, different Norse social classes will be discussed at length and such terms as servant, bondsman/woman, and slave, will be used. As one of the purposes of this essay is to look at and clarify the meaning and context of these terms in Scandinavian, Icelandic and mythic societies, I will use the English terms in order to aid in understanding.

Early Medieval periods reflect one another, and so allow for new interpretations and understandings.

When we look closely at the societies depicted in the myths we do not find the binary oppositions or “racial” traits that we have been taught to look for. It is for this reason that I believe it is of great value to the field of Norse mythology to analyze the myths in a manner similar to the sagas. If we are allowed to see ambiguity and feel sympathy for multiple perspectives in that genre, why not also in the myths?

Through the lens of class is it possible to see how the Eddas describe a fully functioning mythic world. While it could be argued that much of this world may be the invention of the society which wrote down the Eddas, it still provides us with a window into the world of the writers. In the Eddic material we can find a world which is just as alive and complex as the world of the sagas. As such, it seems appropriate to evaluate this world in the same ways as the world of the sagas; that is, as a complex and multifaceted society, beyond the realm of simplistic generalizations. By doing so, it allows us to understand more deeply mythic and mundane notions of power, the values and limitations of social rank, and the societies presented in the mythic world.

II. Sources

II.1 EDDAS

The focus of this study will be the *Poetic Edda* and, to a lesser extent, *Snorra Edda*. Collectively referred to as the Eddas, these works comprise the oldest written sources of Norse myth. Based on knowledge from pre-Christian archaeological evidence, runic inscriptions, and non-native written accounts, it is supposed that they demonstrate spiritual beliefs and mythology from pre-Christian Norse society.³ This notion is complicated by the fact that the Eddas were recorded and/or written in 13th century Iceland, at least two centuries after the official conversion of the country to Christianity around the year 1000 AD.

³ “Introduction,” to *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, Ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington. (London: Routledge, 2002), xiii.

The collection known today as the *Poetic Edda* contains thirty-one tales found in the *Codex Regius* and seven from other sources.⁴ Of these eleven *Codex Regius* and three independent poems, namely *Hyndluljóð*, *Rígsþula*, and *Baldursdraumar*, deal with specially mythological characters and have been called the *goðakvæði*, or gods' poems.⁵ It is these that shall be the focus of this study. The tales found in *Snorra Edda* will largely be used to corroborate or illuminate in-depth analyses of the *Poetic Edda*; however, a few episodes from this collection will also be examined in the final section.⁶

The *Codex Regius* manuscript [GkS 2365 4to] has been dated to around 1270 and has no known author. For a time, its contents were supposed to be the work of Icelandic priest and scholar, Sæmundr fróði from the late 11th century, and that these poems were the mysterious source used for the *Snorra Edda*. However, these theories have largely been dropped and the age of the Eddic poems remains a subject of great debate. *Snorra Edda*, on the other hand, is known to be the work of Icelandic chieftain and scholar, Snorri Sturluson. Written around 1225, it survives in four manuscripts. The oldest of these manuscripts, *Codex Upsaliensis* [DG 11 4to], is dated between 1000-1325. However, it is the slightly younger *Konungsbók Snorra-Eddu* [GKS 2367 4to] manuscript, which is dated between 1300 - 1350, that forms the basis for most modern editions. The *Codex Upsaliensis*, while still recognizably *Snorra Edda*, contains a version of the text distinct from that found in *Konungsbók Snorra-Eddu*, and the other two manuscripts, *Codex Wormianus* [AM 242 fol.] ca. 1350, *Codex Trajectinus* [Utrecht 1374] ca. 1595.

⁴ In this text, the Íslenzk Fornrit edition will be used: *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenzk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 2014).

⁵ This reason for this division has to do with the contents of the poems. The *goðakvæði* are set within the mythological world were as the *hetjukvæði*, or heroic poems are set within the human one. As I am interested in mythic society those of the mythological world are the ones of interest. However, there is an important and interesting trend in the poems that there are, in fact, no servants or slaves mentioned in the heroic poems. While characters may serve one another they are all of the upper classes and little mention of the social structure of their world is ever made.

⁶ In this text Anthony Faulkes editions will be used: Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), and Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Skáldskaparmál I*. Ed. Anthony Faulkes. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998).

II.2 ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR

In order to gain an understanding of class systems in the Norse world and literature I have relied upon the *Íslendingasögur*⁷ ; in particular: *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*,⁸ *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða*,⁹ *Grettis saga*,¹⁰ and *Brennu-Njáls saga*.¹¹ Of these sagas, *Egils saga* first appears in a manuscript roughly dated to 1240, with *Njáls saga* closely following in a manuscript from between 1300-1325.¹² *Hrafnkels saga* oldest appearance is in a manuscript from the first half of the 15th century, but *Grettis saga* is by far the youngest, not appearing until roughly 1500. As with the Eddas, the origins of these tales are not known and all that can be said for certain is that they were first written down at various times in the 13th and 15th centuries. The main debate in scholarship lies in whether these tales have their roots in the time in which they are set, the Saga Age, roughly 10th and 11th centuries, or are entirely 13th -14th reconstructions of this world.¹³

In this study I have chosen to use the Eddas and sagas in conjunction in order to examine Scandinavian, Icelandic and mythological cultures. I believe that it is reasonable to

⁷ The term *saga* connotes a larger collection of texts which have been further divided into sub-genres including: *Íslendingasögur*, *samtíðarsögur*, *konungarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, and *fornaldursögur*. However, this essay will only concern itself with the *Íslendingasögur*, sagas of Icelanders, for the purpose simpler comparison. For more information on saga genres see: Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes. Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society. Volume 2: The reception of Norse myths in medieval Iceland*, The Viking Collection 10 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 50.

⁸ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*. Ed. Sigurður Nordal. Íslenzk Fornrit, 2. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936). Here after: *Egils saga*.

⁹“Hrafnkels saga freysgoða,” *Austfriðinga Sögur*. Ed. Jón Jóhannesson. Íslenzk Fornrit, 11. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1950). Here after: *Hrafnkels saga*.

¹⁰ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*. Ed. Guðni Jónsson. Íslenzk Fornrit, 7. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1936). Here after: *Grettis saga*

¹¹ *Brennu-Njáls saga*. Ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk Fornrit, 12. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954), 92. Here after: *Njáls saga*.

¹² Both *Egils saga* and *Njáls saga* appear in many manuscripts of varying completeness. There are over 60 copies of *Njáls saga* and just over 50 of *Egils saga*.

¹³ For an overview of the debate on oral stories vs. written creations see Gísli Sigurðsson, *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: a Discourse on Method*. (Cambridge, MA: Milman Parry Collection, 2004), 17-2.

use these sources to understand one another, for, regardless of their original oral or constructed backgrounds, we know that they entered the written record at a similar point in Icelandic history. It seems safe, therefore, to assume that they were written at this point to be comprehensible to a similar audience. While the two genres discuss different worlds and societies, they nevertheless tell tales of times, places and characters far removed but still intelligible to the medieval audience.

It can be argued that the early 13th to late 15th century is quite a long span of time in which to assume a similarity of culture or understanding, especially given the distance to the subject matter. However, the sagas, which are set in roughly the same time period, have traditionally been classified within the same genre and analyzed by scholars on equal terms. The world of the sagas is the closest narrative description we have of pagan Iceland and Scandinavia, and, therefore, to a time when pre-Christian myths would have been in use. Over the course of this study I hope to reveal more clearly how these two categories of tales reflect and connect to one another.

III. Approaching Myth and the Mythic

III.1 DEFINING MYTH

When attempting to define myth what we are actually engaged in is defining the mindset with which we, as readers and scholars, intend to engage with the tales. As such, definitions of myth vary widely. Myths have been labeled worldly untruths, religious truths, ritual scripts, cosmic revelations, socio-cultural documents, allegorical codings of reality, and wisdom tales to name but a few.¹⁴ While we may agree with some definitions more than others and find some more useful than others, the beauty of myth is that it can handle practically any

¹⁴ For further reading see: *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. edited by Alan Dundes, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)., in particular essays by Lauri Honko, G.S. Kirk, and J.W. Rogerson. Also see: Eric Csapo, *Theories of mythology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 1-9.

definition thrown at it; for as myth is multi-functional it must also be multi-definitional.¹⁵ The trick to defining myth is then, not to find the ultimate definition of the genre, but rather to choose the angle of perspective from which to engage with myth *this* time.

The danger in definitions often lies in the way in which we frame our studies. Though subtle, the words we chose to talk about myth informs both how we read and what we notice in the tales. John Lindow has said : “a general definition of myth which many academics find useful: stories about gods” and more specifically defined: “Scandinavian or Norse mythology — a set of stories about gods”.¹⁶ At first glance this definition, though simplistic, may seem useful as it leave behind arguments about function and judgments of veracity or value. It simply defines myth by a unifying feature and leaves the rest up to the reader. However, by choosing gods as the defining feature it predisposes the reader to focus on certain characters over others. In its broadness, it limits the scope of the world and the actions that occur therein.

By defining myths as stories about gods we are framing the rest of the cosmological world around one particular set of beings. An example of this can be seen when religious historian Raffaele Pettazzoni passingly says: “the gods, who are the characters in myth...” in an essay on truth in myth.¹⁷ While Pettazzoni is not a scholar of Norse myth, this idea is also present within Norse scholarship. John Lindow and Margaret Clunies Ross, who both take the an anthropological approach to mythic society, focus entirely upon the societies of the Æsir and Jǫtnar as the most important characters.¹⁸ While there is something to be gained from close scrutinization of the Æsir and Jǫtnar, there is also a danger of losing sight of the broader mythological world.

¹⁵ Lauri Honko uses the term multidimensional to describe myth. In her essay “The Problem with Defining Myth” she offers a list of ten different angles from which to approach its study, see: Lauri Honko. “The Problem with Defining Myth”. *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Edited by Alan Dundes, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 46-47.

¹⁶ John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian mythology*, (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1997), 9-10.

¹⁷ Raffaele Pettazzoni, “The Truth Myth,” *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Ed. Alan Dundes, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 98.

¹⁸ Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, 13. and Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged echoes. Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society. Volume 1: The Myths*, The Viking Collection 7 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 60.

For the purpose of this essay, I would like to take the simple definition of “myths as stories about the gods” and broaden its scope to “myths as stories about the cosmological world”. Through this broadening of definition, we can begin to look at how all the different characters and communities of the myths functioned as a society, rather than as characters walking upon a supernatural stage.¹⁹

Echoing Mircea Eliade, Lauri Honko says “Myth *functions* as examples, as models”.²⁰ In this line of thought, myths are understood to function as models for human culture and society, where people used them to both maintain and justify social systems. Yet, it is not often discussed how myth comes to possess these models for reality. As this essay is concerned with how mythic and human societies correlate, this question important to consider.

Eric Csapo defines a myth as “a narrative which is considered socially important, and is told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance”.²¹ This definition is one that allows myth to act independently from active cult. In combination with my definition of myth, as stories about the cosmological world, what we have is the idea that myth and mythic society function as a models for human society when they are considered to have social weight.

In the Christian - Norse world of the 13th century, it is unknown just how much weight stories connected to pagan beliefs held. However, it seems that people were at least aware of a pagan past and that these stories were connected to those beliefs. Given scholarship on the influence of myth on human society, it would be easy to argue that the social systems found in the Eddas functioned as a mythic, sociological template. However, it seems unlikely that this is case. Far more likely, is a combination influences in which the Eddas, sagas and actual societies all influenced and reflected one another. Th. P. Van Baaren offers a way out of this oneway, myth to culture theory:

¹⁹ While I recognize that such a study is in danger of losing the esoteric and religious values of the myths, I think that there are times when it is important to step away from such readings. Myths can be interpreted and used in many ways at once including as entertaining stories and models for the humans world. Both of these readings require an understanding of the world behind the mythic action. There is no reason why beliefs and allegorical readings cannot be placed on top of this practical and rationalized reading of the myths.

²⁰ Honko, “*The Problem with Defining Myth*”, 51.

²¹ Csapo, *Theories of mythology*, 9.

Myth, even if we define it as the supernatural charter on which a society is based, is not at all inflexible, except in theory. In practice it may change and does so, as long as its unchangeability can be upheld in theory.²²

The “myth” of myth is, in Baaren’s view, that it is unchanging; a set of tales that explain both how it is and how it always has been. Baaren outlines a system of how and when mythic explanations of reality have and are likely to change. For instance when new technologies, outside influences, changing political realities have altered reality so that it no longer matches the myths.²³ He says, mythic explanations give things “more than human authority”, but when reality changes “one force [mythic or worldly reality] must give in”.²⁴ It therefore seems more appropriate to focus on how the relationship between mythic and worldly reality allows us to understand something deeper in both, rather than on only looking at how myth may have influenced human reality. Honko puts it beautifully when she says:

Myth as mirror of culture, social structure, etc. Myths are considered to reflect certain facets of culture. This reflection is seldom direct or photographic but may reveal values which would otherwise be too difficult to detect.²⁵

By looking at both the reflector and the reflected it may be that something new can be revealed.

III.2 MYTHIC MUNDANE

As will probably be evident from the above discussion, this paper shall look at aspects of everyday human life which occur in the mythic world. This is what I call the *mythic mundane*. The basis for this theory comes from the idea that stories are connected to the teller’s and audience’s reality. Einar Ól. Sveinsson writes:

Folk-stories are full of pictures of peasant life, of people's activities and customs, but not because that is what they are about. They are always about something 'story-worthy',

²² Th. P. Van Baaren, “The Flexibility of Myth,” in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. Ed. Alan Dundes, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 217.

²³ *Ibid.*, 218-223.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

²⁵ Honko, “*The Problem with Defining Myth*”, 47.

memorable, rare or exciting events. But they must be clothed, so to speak, in people's daily lives.²⁶

While this essay deals with myths rather than folk-stories, the Norse myths are equally well clothed in daily life as both settings and actions parallel human life. In fact, a few of the narratives are concerned with understanding the mundane details of the mythic world.

In *Gylfaginning*, Gylfi asks many questions about the practicalities of mythic life: “Hvar bygði Ymir eða við hvat lifði hann?”, “Eða hvat hafask þeir [Æsir] at?”, “Hvat hefir hann [Óðinn] at fá þeim [einherjarnir] at vistum?”, and “Hvart hefir Óðinn þat samaborðhald semeinherjar?”²⁷ The answers are extraordinary and, at the same time, practical. This same attention to mundane detail can be seen in the poem *Alvíssmál*, where AlviSS recites the names of everyday items such as wheat, ale, wood, wind, and rain in multiple mythic “languages”. The passage on wood is an excellent example:

Viðr heitir með mǫnnum
en vallar fax með goðum,
kalla hliðþang halir,
eldi jǫtnar,
álfar fagrlima,
kalla vǫnd vanir.²⁸

This is the mythic mundane at work; it demonstrates the ways in which the mythic relies upon details rooted in everyday life in order to connect with its audience.

Margaret Clunies Ross strongly supported the practice of reading myths within the context of the society which produced them in order to gain a deeper understanding of the tales.²⁹ However, she also argued that:

There is in fact little descriptive detail in the sources about either the world itself or the beings that inhabit it beyond what is strictly necessary for the conduct of mythic narrative or

²⁶ Einar Ólafur Sveinsson. *The Folk Stories of Iceland*. Revised, Einar Péterson. Translated, Benedikt Benedikt. Edited, Anthony Faulkes. (Reykjavík, 1940; reprint, Viking Society for Northern Research, Vol. 16. Exeter: Short Run Press Limited, 2003), 278.

²⁷ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*. 11, 22, 32, 33.

²⁸ “Alvíssmál,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014), 442, stz 28.

²⁹ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged echoes, Volume 1*: 17.

allusion and the situation of myth within its operational world.³⁰

She went further to say that:

...early Scandinavian peoples understood the beings of their mythological world, not as rounded characters whose psyches are available for inspection, but as figures who are known by their actions and attributes, which are paradigmatic in a world that is constituted in a certain way well known to its audience.³¹

I would like to challenge these ideas by reading more closely for those elements of the mundane human world which have made their way into the heart of the mythic universe.

Once we have begun to look at the world from this perspective even the grand feats start to take on a very definite sense of the mundane. Óðinn steals mead; Þórr fetches a cauldron, drinks deeply and wrestles; Loki eats food, cuts hair, goes to the blacksmith's; Frigg protects her child; and Freyja serves mead and asks about the lineage of her lover. Yet, their feats are of epic proportions as the mythical meanings and stories become attached to these mundane acts. Óðinn drinks the mead of poetry, Þórr fetches a cauldron fit for gods, drinks the sea and wrestles old age, Loki eats against fire, cuts the hair of Þórr's wife and brings back amazing treasures; Frigg asks every being in the world to protect her child, and Freyja serves mead to a drunk and boastful jötunn, and seeks wisdom from a powerful woman riding a wolf. It is through the mundane that the ordinary becomes the mythic and takes on a role of its own.

III.3 SERVANTS IN MYTH

In the combined *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda* there are just over forty individual servants and slaves; more if you count all of the characters who temporarily take on serving roles. They are listed here in Table 1 with the first column containing only those found in the *Poetic*

³⁰ Ibid., 43.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

Edda, plus the Æsir who take on serving roles in these poems; the second column contains

Servants in the <i>Poetic Edda</i>	Servants in both Eddas	Servants in <i>Snorra Edda</i>
Gerðr's ambátt (maid) Gerðr's féhirðir (herdsman) Byggvir and Beyla, þjónustumenn (servants) Þórr's ambátt (Loki) Hárbarðr (Óðinn?) Eggðer, gýgiar hirðir Fulla, Frigg's eskismey (maid)	Skírnir, Freyr's skósvéinn (servant) Þjálfí, Þórr's þjónustumaðr (servant) Bolverk (Óðinn) Fimafeng and Eldir, þjónustumenn (servants) Fenja and Menja, ambátta (bondswomen) Self-Serving Feasts Huginn and Muninn	Ganglat and Ganglot, Hel's servants Röskva, Þórr's þjónustukóna Gerriod's serving man Bil and Hiuki Gná, Freyja's messenger Sol and Bil, servers in Valhöll Andhrimnir, (cook) Útgarðr-Loki's cupbearer Hermóðr -messenger Æsir's unnamed messengers Baugi's Þrælur (9 slaves) Mokkurkalfi Animal Servants
Æsir in Servant Roles		
Þórr (<i>Hymiskviða</i>) Loki (<i>Þymiskviða</i>) Óðinn (<i>Baldrs draumar</i>)		

those found in both Eddas; and the third column shows those in *Snorra Edda*.

Table 1: Lists of All Servants or Serving Characters in *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*

These characters act in many different roles and capacities – from minor background characters to the main protagonists in the myths. The prevalence of these characters begs the question: why have they gone overlooked as a group for so long?

Some of this may be put down to an abstract reading of the myths based on allegorical assumptions. Many scholars seem to read the tales with a very particular understanding of myth in which allegory can be used to explain away much. Take for example Ursula Dronke's interpretation of *Skírnismál*:

Skírnir can only be the sun's ray personified. It is he, not the sun himself, who penetrates deep down to provoke the self-satisfied earth to wedlock. He is the awakening shaft of light and warmth that puts an end to the infertile winter.³²

While this is one way in which the myths may be interpreted, it is important to remember that it is just one of many. There is most likely also an element of classism in our over-reading of such characters. While this classism may not have to do with the actual

³² *The Poetic Edda, Volume II: Mythological Poems*. Ed. and Trans. Ursula Dronke. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 399- 400.

discrimination against the lower ranks of society, it may have to do with the way in which we, as modern readers have been taught to think of both servants and gods. While the reasons for this are undoubtedly complex and have roots in such things as elitism, celebrity culture, monotheistic notions of God, and nineteenth century etiquette, it is clear, from the lack of scholarship if nothing else, that we have presumptions about who the main characters in myth are and whose actions are the most important. Perhaps by looking more closely at the cultures who interacted with these myths it will be possible to reverse some of these oversights.

Beginning with the sagas, we shall now turn our attention to how society was structured and how class was understood within Icelandic and Scandinavian societies of the Viking and Early Middle Ages. Through this study we can begin to understand the ways in which people of these eras might have read characters of lower class in narrative. The hope is that this will allow us to approach the Eddas with fresh eyes and a greater appreciation of the role servants, slaves, and helpers played in these myths.

IV. Class Systems

Class systems and societal hierarchies form the basis of this study. However, it is not concerned with theories of why or how they exist, nor with the sociological ramifications of this existence. It is sufficient to note that the people who lived in and wrote about Norse societies recognized differentiated social groups in their culture, which they named and classified. As shall be shown these hierarchical groupings of people were based on their wealth and freedom status, which was strongly connected to political, legal, and social opportunities and obligations. This is what is meant by class and class systems. The term rank refers to the the classifications designated by this social hierarchy, rather than any officially sanctioned position. Ranks existed as classifications both between and within classes, as shall be seen.

Class systems in Iceland and mainland Scandinavia during the Viking and Early Middle Ages were of a complex nature. In older scholarship, these societies have been generalized into either two or three part systems. The binary system, largely based on Marc Bloch's theories of feudalism, distinguishes only between *free* and *not free* members of

society.³³ Whereas the tripartite system, which echoes the one found in the Eddic poem *Rígsþula*,³⁴ distinguishes between a noble/ruling class, a free farming class, and an enslaved, or un-free, working class.³⁵ While the latter theory may be closer to reality than the former, both of these models fail to truly encapsulate the complexity of the societal structure that is found in literature, laws and the archaeological record.³⁶

Using the term “structural dominance” to describe the position of the upper echelons of Scandinavian society, Kristen Hastrup offers a model in which the upper classes effectively held the positions of rulers over lower classes.³⁷ Lars Hermanson argues for both “horizontal bonds” within social classes and “vertical bonds” between hierarchical classes.³⁸ Hastrup's terminology reflects a society dominated by the upper class while Hermanson's model offers a far more complex system of exchange and reciprocity. However, both of these models offer useful perspectives when it comes to comprehending the Norse societies.

Complicating all of the models is the fact that between the 10th and 14th centuries both Iceland and Scandinavia were undergoing societal changes as their political and religious systems were transforming. The following section will attempt an overview of the Icelandic and mainland Scandinavian class systems of these periods as well as the changes taking place.

³³ Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk, “Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia,” in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Eds. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk. The Medieval Countryside, Vol. 9. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 2.

³⁴ *Rígsþula* will be discussed in more detail in the third part of this essay.

³⁵ Kristen Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: an Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1985), 107, and Poulsen and Sindbæk, “Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia,” 2.

³⁶ Poulsen and Sindbæk, “Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia,” 2, 11-13, and Tore Iversen, “Thrall's Manumission, Land Clearing, and State Building in Medieval Norway,” in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Eds. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk. The Medieval Countryside, Vol. 9. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 263, and Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*. (London: Yale University Press, 1988), 61.

³⁷ Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 81.

³⁸ Lars Hermanson, “Vertical Bonds and Social Power: Ideas of Lordship in Twelfth Century Scandinavia,” in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Eds. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk. The Medieval Countryside, Vol. 9. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 63-64.

IV.1 ICELAND

Early Icelandic class systems, while not static, were more stable than those in Scandinavia of the same time. During the Free-State period,³⁹ Iceland was controlled by a class of wealthy farmers and *goðar*, often translated as chieftains.⁴⁰ These men, and sometimes women, owned large farms on which lived a whole range of dependents, of varying rank and position. The basis of early Icelandic society was most likely the Norwegian system of the 9th century as this is where many of the wealthy, landowning families originated from.⁴¹ However, we shall start with Iceland as it allows for a more in-depth analysis from which a model can be constructed, which can be expanded to include the larger Scandinavian systems.

Much of what we know about the Icelandic lower classes and the inner workings of households comes from Icelandic laws read in conjunction with literature and archaeological evidence. Knowledge of the early settlement period is thus mostly reconstructed from later accounts and systems. Early settlers would have come to Iceland with an existing culture which quickly adapted to the new land and emerging society, some of which were made by choice and some by circumstance.⁴²

When settlers first arrived from Norway or the Celtic Isles they seem to have brought slaves with them but this practice died out relatively quickly given the constraints of Icelandic life and farming.⁴³ However, everyone was required by law to be connected to a

³⁹ The period beginning around the turn of 10th century until 1262, when Iceland came under the Norwegian crown.

⁴⁰ Throughout this paper I shall use English translations of Old Norse terms when possible. However, I will continue to use the term *goði* (pl. *goðar*) rather than the common translation of chieftain. This term is not fully understood within the Icelandic setting and there is no space here to go into all the complexities of the term. For more information see: Jón Hnefill Adalsteinsson, *A Piece of Horse Liver: Myth, Ritual and Folklore in Old Icelandic Sources*, (Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan, 1998), 35-56.

⁴¹ Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 107.

⁴² P.H. Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings: Scandinavia and Europe AD 700 - 1100*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 39.

⁴³ Jesse Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*. (Middlesex: Hararlik Press, 1993), 99.

household and so, in its place emerged a class of freed dependents.⁴⁴ Despite the loss of the slave class, distinctions between free and not-free continued to be important.⁴⁵

The wealth and power of the upper class was in part connected to the lower class members of their household. Dependent laborers did a combination of house and field work, and were generally involved in all aspects of daily life.⁴⁶ However, the lower down the social ladder someone was the more undesirable and physically challenging their tasks were likely to be.⁴⁷

Hired workers were not paid in the modern sense of the word, but rather joined the household of a particular farm for a year.⁴⁸ While they had the option to move at the end of a year, most probably stayed in good situations and the farm was as much their home as the landowners.⁴⁹ Scandinavian systems tended to run on reciprocal relationships where goods and services were exchanged not only for wealth, but more for the connections such relationships provided.⁵⁰ These are the vertical bonds described by by Hermanson.⁵¹ Servants and laborers in Iceland were not isolated from the upper class, rather they shared living spaces and tasks. ⁵² Miller further points out that the servants in the eddas do not act with deference to their masters, rather they speak with the same frankness as members of the

⁴⁴ William Ian Miller. "Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 120, and Iversen, "Thrall's Manumission, Land Clearing, and State Building in Medieval Norway", 266.

⁴⁵ *Freed* men and *free* men did not have the same status in Iceland of Scandinavia. *Freed* men were of lower status, and, in part, not free. It could take up to four generations before the *freed man* status was dropped. Iversen, "Thrall's Manumission, Land Clearing, and State Building in Medieval Norway", 266.

⁴⁶ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 79-81.

⁴⁷ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 79, and Janken Myrdal, "Milking and Grinding, Digging and Herding," in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Eds. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk. The Medieval Countryside, Vol. 9. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 295.

⁴⁸ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 120.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Jón Víðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship in Iceland c. 900 -1300," in *Friendship and Social Networks in Scandinavia c.1000 - 1800*. Eds. Jón Víðar Sigurðsson and Thomas Småberg. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 43.

⁵¹ Hermanson, "Vertical Bonds and Social Power", 64.

⁵² Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 81.

upper class, he calls them “non-servile servants.”⁵³ Yet, distinctions of class continued to be clear and important, even when masters and servants worked side by side.⁵⁴

The society depicted in the sagas is full of characters of all different social standings. While the main action of the sagas is driven and controlled by people from the upper classes, the narratives do not neglect the rest of society. In *Njáls saga*, the feud between Bergþóra and Hallgerðr is an excellent base map of this structure, as characters of increasing ranks are engaged to kill each other on their mistresses’ behalfs. It begins with the death of Svartr, a *húskarl* (bondsmen/slave), who is killed by Hallgerðr’s *verkstjóri* (overseer), Kolr, a slave of higher rank.⁵⁵ Kolr is in turn killed by Atli, a *maðr vistlauss* (unemployed man) and a *akrgerðarmaðr* (plough-man), who is hired on by Bergþóra and whom Njáll afterward agrees to revenge as a *frjálsan mann* (freeman).⁵⁶ Atli is killed by Brynjólf róstu, an unlanded and unruly kinsman of Hallgerðr, who is killed by a Þórðr leysingjason, a second generation freeman, foster-father to Njáll’s sons, and married to one of Njáll’s kinswomen.⁵⁷ This results in Þórðr’s death at the hands of Sigmundur Lambson, one of Gunnarr’s respectable but disagreeable kinsmen under Hallgerðr’s influence, and his unsavory Swedish *félagi* (comrade), Skjöldr.⁵⁸ Þórðr’s death is revenged by Njáll’s sons, Skarpheðinn, Helgi, and Grímr.⁵⁹ After Gunnarr settles for the final time with Njáll, the feud ends. This chain of events is illustrated in the two charts below:

⁵³ William Ian Miller, *‘Why is your axe bloody?’ a reading of Njáls saga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97 -98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵⁵ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 92.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95, 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 105, 107.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

SVARTR ← KOLR ←
ATLI ← BYRNJÓLF RÓSTU ←
ÞÓRÐR LEYSINGJASON ← SIGMUNDR LAMBSON AND SKJÖLD ←
NJÁLSSONAR ↔ NJÁLL AND GUNNARR

Table 2: *Njáls saga* Feud - by Name

SLAVE ← OVERSEER ←
WORKER (POST-HUMOUS) FREEDMAN ← UNLANDED FREEMAN ←
2 ND GEN. FREEDMAN ← MERCHANT, LANDOWNER'S RELATIVE ←
LANDOWNER'S SONS ↔ LANDOWNERS

Table 3: *Njáls Saga* Feud - by Title

In Figures 2 and 3, the progression of the feud can be read left to right, top to bottom, with the arrows pointing from killer to victim. Each line indicates the legal status of each individual, with characters of equal legal status sharing a line. Figure 3 shows the the social rank of each character, from lowest to highest. In this flow we social structure start to emerge.

After each death Njáll and Gunnarr settle the score by paying each other compensation. In his book *Why is Your Axe Bloody?*: William Miller has analyzed this interaction in great detail and he finds that:

Not only is there escalation, this is also an imbalance by which the author reveals his partiality to the Bergthora party. In each row a balance is struck by declaring a Hallgerd-column person of high formal status to be equal to a lower-status person in the Bergthora column.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ William Ian Miller, *Why is your axe bloody?*, 77.

While Miller is primarily interested in the balance of the system, I am interested in the imbalance of the system and how this imbalance shows a complexity of social interactions. In fact, what we see in this exchange is a difference between social and legal understandings of the value of people. Miller argues for a legal balancing of the system and uses Gunnarr's and Njáll's responses to the deaths to demonstrate this.⁶¹

Bergthora	Hallgerd	Price
1. Svart (slave)	2. Kol (slave)	12 oz.
3. Atli (freedman?)	4. Brynjolf (free kin of Hallgerd)	100 oz.
5. Thord Freedmansson	6. Sigmund (free kin of Gunnar)	200 oz.
7. Skarphedin kills Sigmund but not technically in revenge for Thord, but for Sigmund's verses.		

Table 4: Miller's Balanced-Exchange Model from *Njáls saga*⁶²

As is shown in the chart above, Gunnarr and Njáll take the legal status of the individual and make equal monetary settlements. However, while they seem most concerned with the legal status of individuals, their wives operate on a different understanding of value. Gunnarr and Njáll seem to be using the three part system mentioned above, which values slaves, freemen, and upper class men as distinct through the amount owed upon their deaths; they do not distinguish between the social value of these people beyond their legal categories.⁶³

Bergþóra and Hallgerðr, on the other hand, see the slight differences in social status of each individual and do not feel that justice has been done. In fact, they see the equal valuing of differently ranked individuals of the same legal class as an insult. This is what Miller is talking about when he says that “a Hallgerd-column person of high formal status [is declared] equal to a lower-status person in the Bergthora column”.⁶⁴ Miller and these women can see that an overseer is of more value than a slave and a kinsman, no matter how unruly and distant, is of more value than a hired man, and thus the feud continues until the next level of escalation would require Gunnar killing the Njálssons, which he declines to do out of

⁶¹ Ibid., 76.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 77

friendship for Njáll. While this episode in *Njáls saga* provides an outline of the Icelandic class system, as understood from legal and social perspectives, it does not demonstrate the practical differences between or within classes. For this we will turn to another text.

Hrafnkels saga is a narrative very much concerned with the subtleties of class, power and wealth. Its plot highlights the differences between the ranks of *free* men, including *goðar* by heritage, *goði* by design, wealthy farmers, comfortable farmers, and poor farmers. Just as in *Njáls saga*, the interactions between the characters demonstrates a much subtler understanding of class rank and power than that found in the binary or tripartite models.

Early in saga, Hrafnkell sets himself up as a *goði*: “Hrafnkel byggði allan dalinn ok gaf mönnum land, en vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim.”⁶⁵ Shortly thereafter, we meet his neighbors, Þorbjörn and his son Einar, characters from the other end of the spectrum of free men: “Þorbjörn átti fé lítit, en ómegð mikla.”⁶⁶ When Þorbjörn tells Einar that the farm cannot support him, Einar goes to Hrafnkell to seek work. The terms they agree on are: “Þú [Einar] skalt reka heim fimm tigu ásauðar í seli ok víða heim ǫllum sumarviði. Þetta skaltu vinna til tveggja missera björg hafa vilja”.⁶⁷ This is not a good job for Einar, it provides him with what he needs, but in the process his status has been greatly reduced.

In these first interactions we see how men of the similar legal standing can exist in very different conditions. Hrafnkell has elevated himself, while Þorbjörn must admit his poverty and Einar becomes a shepherd. It also shows how unstable statuses were as people’s circumstances changed. Miller has suggested that it was not uncommon for people of any class to move between statuses as their fortunes changed.⁶⁸ This saga shows the ebb and flow of fortunes and slight shifts in rank well.

In the same district as Hrafnkell live Þorbjörn’s brother, Bjarni, and his son, Sámr. Both Sámr and Bjarni are farmers of more means than Þorbjörn but less than Hrafnkell. When tensions break out over the death of Einar at Hrafnkell’s hands, the social disparity between all of these characters comes to the forefront as Þorbjörn tries to get free man’s

⁶⁵“ Hrafnkels saga freysgoða,” 99.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁸ William Ian Miller. “Bloodtaking and Peacemaking,” 26.

compensation. To this request Hrafnkell responds: “Þá þykkisk þú jafnmennt mér, ok munnum vit ekki at því sættask.”⁶⁹ Again, legal and social understandings of class fail to match up as Þorbjörn acts a freeman, but Hrafnkell sees a disparity in their positions. Þorbjörn is then forced to ask his brother for aid, but gets none until Sámur says that he will take on the legal case.

As the saga continues, the various characters jockey for status and power in order to achieve their own ends. The addition of two characters of a hereditary *goðar*, namely Þorkell and Þorgeirr, adds another level of rank to the mix. When Sámur and Þorkell’s first meet, Sámur attempts to classify Þorkell:

Sámur mælti: “Hvart ertu goðorðsmaðr?” Hann kvað þat fjarri fara.
“Ertu þá bóndi?” sagði Sámur. Hann kvað eigi þat vera. Sámur mælti:
“Hvat manna ertu þá?” Hann svarar: “Ek em einn einhleypingr. [...] En nú em ek á vist með bróður mínum, þeim er Þorgeirr heitir.” “Er hann goðorðsmaðr?” segir Sámur. Þorkell svarar: “Goðorðsmaðr er hann vist um Þorskafjörð ok víðara um Vestfjörðu.”⁷⁰

Sámur and Þorbjörn’s case against Hrafnkell is failing due to its lack of support until Sámur enlists the aid of Þorkell and Þorgeirr, who effectively outrank Hrafnkell through lineage and social power. This power is demonstrated a few scenes later when Þorkell and Þorgeirr arrive at court with such a crowd of friends and supporters that Hrafnkell cannot physically get into the court: “Þar var fyrir sá mannfjöld, at Hrafnkell komask hvergi nær.”⁷¹ With the addition of this power, Sámur wins his case and Hrafnkell is stripped of his title and land.⁷²

Both William Miller and R. George Thomas have mapped the class system as presented in this saga along with detailed discussions of how these ranks inform and drive the plot.⁷³ Starting with Norwegian kings and Byzantine emperors, Thomas and Miller go down through *goði*, *hofðingjar* (leaders at assembly), shared *goðorð*, *yðirmaðr* (overlord),

⁶⁹ “Hrafnkels saga freysgoða”, 106.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 111.

⁷¹ Ibid., 117.

⁷² Ibid., 117, 121.

⁷³ William Ian Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities: Hard Cases, Hard Choices*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30-31, and George R. Thomas, “Men and Society in Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða,” in *Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference*. Ed. Peter Foote et al. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), 421-423.

undirmaðr, *bóndi* (farmer), children of *bóndi*, *einhlepingr* (unattached free man), *skósveinn* (servant boy), and end with *húskarl* (bondsmen/servant).⁷⁴ While their system is useful, it is top heavy, as *Hrafnkels saga* tends to be oriented towards upwards mobility. However, in combination with *Njáls saga* it is possible to outline a more balanced system.

GODI
WEALTHY BÓNDI
MERCHANT/ SUCCESSFUL TRAVELER
POOR BÓNDI
CHILD OF BÓNDI
FREE EMPLOYED MAN
EINHLEPINGR (UNEMPLOYED FREEMAN)
FREED MAN (AND DESCENDANTS)
HÚSKARL/ HÚSFREYJA (SERVANTS, BONDSMEN)
ÞRÆLL/ÁMBATT (SLAVES, SERVANTS)

Table 5: Basic Icelandic Class System

It is important to remember that this is not a perfectly linear system with hard divisions between each groups. While a slave would not become a *goði*, characters of roughly the upper, middle, and lower classes shifted around among the various roles and ranks at different points in their lives. Miller puts it:

The ranks of servants were comprised of people of greatly different expectations. *Sturlunga saga* on occasion shows the sons of householders as homemen in other *bœndr*'s households, that is as life-cycle servants, biding time until their fathers died or decided to share or cede authority in the management of the family farm.⁷⁵

The fluidity of this system is part of what makes it so hard to categorize, especially when the words used for the various categories seem to overlap and change over time. By expanding it

⁷⁴ Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, 30, and Thomas, "Men and Society in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*", 421-422.

⁷⁵ Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 121.

out into a broader Scandinavian context it may be possible to gain more understandings of these systems.

IV.2 MAINLAND SCANDINAVIA

The challenge with reconstructing social systems in mainland Scandinavia in the Viking and Early Medieval period comes, as one might expect, from the lack of written records in the first half, and the foreign, Icelandic, depictions for the bulk of the second half. The main challenge, of course, is that this is quite a long period of time which is being discussed and native written records appear only at the very end of it in the 13th and 14th centuries. We are also talking about a vast area, and while the general patterns of hierarchy and stratified society seem to have existed in landscape systems and archaeology, there is no guarantee that we are actually seeing the same system or patterns playing out. Yet, similarities exist in both the archaeological and written records.

The material that does exist in runic inscriptions, foreign accounts, the archaeological record, place names, and knowledge of later Scandinavian communities points to an established class system; or as Stefan Brink puts it “...one may start with the truistic statement that early Scandinavian society was a hierarchically structured one”.⁷⁶ Using place name evidence and archaeology from Sweden, Brink lays out the following system: King of kings, via the kings, the sub-kings, chieftains and high officials, the law-speakers, the military leaders, the emissaries, and the cult-leaders and/or secular leaders, the warriors in the *hirð* and the *lið*, the free farmer and the tenant, down to the *þrælar*; slaves.⁷⁷ He suggests that “all of these, probably except the first (upper strata) and the small number of warriors in the mobile *hirð*, were tied to the land; they were farmers”.⁷⁸ In this categorization, it may again be possible to fit everyone into the three part system. However, it should be apparent from this list that to rely solely on such a model would greatly undercut the complex subtlety of the system.

⁷⁶ Stefan Brink. “Social order in the early Scandinavian landscape”. *Settlement and Landscape*. Ed. Ch. Fabeck & J. Ringtved. (Århus: Jutland Archaeological Society, 1999), 424.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Using a similar method in Denmark, Andres Dobat has mapped aristocratic-type class of the Early Medieval Scandinavia, demonstrating how this group seems to have been expanding throughout the period as the power of central kingships became established.⁷⁹ Martin Hanssen has used the archaeology and landscape studies to map out changing patterns in hierarchy in Southern Scandinavia during the Viking period and finds the same shift towards centers of aristocratic power gathering together in a fairly deliberate way.⁸⁰ The archaeological record shows a period of flux and change as existing social structures grew more complex and hierarchical systems seem to have further solidified.

Of the Scandinavian societies, we know the most about Norway because it is featured in Icelandic sagas and possesses its own law codes. Since a great bulk of the Icelandic settlers arrived from Norway there is also a great deal that has been extrapolated from Icelandic systems.⁸¹ Examinations of Swedish and Danish law codes have shown them to have roughly equivalent systems of power, from which similar social structures have been extrapolated.⁸² It is, therefore, from a mix of foreign and legal sources that class systems have been recreated.

As has been said above, in the Viking and Early Medieval periods social structures in Scandinavia were in flux. The three main changes had to do with the rise of monarchies, Christian traditions of kingship, and the decline of slavery.⁸³ Before the rise of monarchical kingship it seems that there existed a system of minor kingships and chieftaincies, similar to those seen in Iceland. This system was dependent on “tributary relations” or “gift economies” in which leaders and followers were engaged in a reciprocal system of gifting as a way to tie

⁷⁹ Andres Siegfried Dobat, “Mapping social order,” in *Navnemiljøer og samfund i jernalder og vikingetid*. Eds. Lisbeth Eilersgaard Christensen og Bent Jørgensen (*NORNA-rapporter 86.*, 2011), 24.

⁸⁰ Martin Hanssen, “Aristocratic Expressions in Settlement from the Viking Age to the Middle Ages,” in *Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia*. Eds. Bjørn Poulsen and Søren Michael Sindbæk. *The Medieval Countryside*, Vol. 9. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2011), 87.

⁸¹ Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, 57.

⁸² Poulsen and Sindbæk, “Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia,” 2.

⁸³ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 166; Poulsen and Sindbæk, “Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia,” 2; and Hermanson, “Vertical Bonds and Social Power,” 64.

themselves together.⁸⁴ Leaders both demonstrated and retained their power through their followers who they attracted through generosity and reputation.⁸⁵

Chieftains and kings of equal rank engaged in friend relationships to create political alliances and power bases while being supported by warriors and wealthy farmers of lesser ranks while providing protection to the lower class residents of their land.⁸⁶ Below this upper echelon, were the minor leaders, warriors, unlanded men of high birth, merchants, and semi-independent farmers of various wealth levels all of whom would have been connected in some way to the more powerful lords. Within this system, even as people of the upper class possessed more, their basis of power came from the people who supported them.

This system began to change as kings rose up backed by Christian ideologies in which kingship came from divine right rather than friendship and the support of followers. By the 12th century, Scandinavian kingship no longer relied upon the social structure in the same way as it previously done and power came down from the king rather than up from friendship-bonds.⁸⁷ At the same time slavery was dying out in Scandinavia, which essentially removed the lowest class from society and created new levels of tenant farmers and semi-free men.⁸⁸ However, just as in Iceland the idea of slavery, or at least the idea of *not-free* vs. *free*, remained important within the law codes.⁸⁹ As slavery vanished, people were no longer owned, but they were just as dependent upon the people above them as tenet farming and servitude took its place.⁹⁰

In general we know less about the lower classes in Scandinavia than we do in Iceland. People of these classes tend to leave less obvious traces of their presence in the archaeological record and the literature offers little aid. Norwegian episodes in the sagas

⁸⁴ Jón Víðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship in Iceland c. 900 -1300," 49; Poulsen and Sindbæk, "Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia," 13; and Hermanson, "Vertical Bonds and Social Power", 63.

⁸⁵ Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia*. (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 41.

⁸⁶ Hermanson, "Vertical Bonds and Social Power" 63-64.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁸ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 116.

⁸⁹ Sawyer, *Kings and Vikings*, 39 - 41.

⁹⁰ Poulsen and Sindbæk, "Settlement and Lordship in Viking and Early Medieval Scandinavia," 15.

often contain very few mentions of lower class characters. While this in itself is not unusual for the genre, the lack of descriptions of everyday life in Norway is.

Both *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga* contain episodes which take place in Norway. In *Grettis saga* there are actually very few mentions of slaves or servants in the Norwegian sections. The first two references are not to actual slavery, but rather to the act of submitting to the king's rule: “[Hann] eigi nenna at gerask konungsþræll ok biðja þess, er hann áttiáðr sjálftr,” and “Lízk mér betr komit, frændi, at þú erfir fōður þinn en konungsþrælur.”⁹¹ When Grettir himself travels to Norway there are a few passing references to lower classes all of which take place when Grettir is staying in Þorfinnr’s house: “Þorfinnr fór nú við þrjá tigu felsingja til jólaveizlunnar.”⁹² When Þorfinnr’s wife admonishes him: “Launar þú ok illa Þorfiini fyrir þat, er hann tók þik af skipbroti félausan ok hefir haldit þik í vetr sem frálsan mann.”⁹³ The implication here being that in such a situation Þorfinnr could easily have required Grettir to sign on as a laborer or to take him as a slave in exchange for his keep. Finally, when Grettir is fighting the berserkers Þorfinnr’s wife calls on the *húskarlar* (laborers), free or not it is not clear, to assist him.⁹⁴ There is no mention of servants or slaves in any of the other places which Grettir visits in Norway. While in general *Grettis saga* contains less references to lower classes than other sagas, there are certainly more references within the sections of the text set in Iceland, and, as shall be discussed later, there are many comments on class within the rest of the saga.

Egils saga contains far more descriptions of Norwegian households in the Viking Age. Right from the beginning we see these workers mentioned with Kveldúlfr's property and the results of their work as part of his income: “[...] var þat siðr hans at rísa upp árdegis ok ganga þáum sýslur manna eða þar er smiðr váru ok sjá yfir fénað sinn ok akra.”⁹⁵ This is the gathering of wealth around specific landholders seen in some of the land development of the late Iron Age and early Viking Age as described above. Just as in *Grettis saga* there are many references made to the change in status landowners were expected to undergo should they

⁹¹ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, 7 and 16.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹⁵ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, 4.

submit to King Haraldr: they can either defend their land and status or “[...] at ganga með sjálfvilja í ánauð ok gerask þrælar Haralds.”⁹⁶ The reality of this choice becomes clear:

Haraldr konungr eignaðisk í hverju fylki óðul ǫll ok allt land,
byggt ok óbyggt, ok jafnvel sjóinn ok vǫtnin, ok skyldu allir
búendr vera hans leiglendingar, svá þeir, er á morkina ortu, ok
saltkarlarnir ok allir veiðimenn bæði á sjó ok landi þá váru allir
þeir honum lýðskyldir.⁹⁷

Here we see the changing dynamics of leadership as a new layer of hierarchy is being created. Haraldr “enslaves” those who oppose him and gives land, wealth and status to those who support him.⁹⁸ Yet, as we have seen in *Grettis saga* this rewarding of wealth and land is mostly an allowance of the king for people to retain what they have; which rankles many of those men of higher classes.

In Þórólfr Kveldúlfsson part of the tale we first encounter household size used as a marker of status: “Hann hafði aldregi færa frelsingja heima en hundrað”.⁹⁹ When Þórólfr must leave his farm:

Síðan tók Þórólfr skip þau, er hann átti, ok bar þar á lausafé
allt, þat er hann mátti með fara, ok hafði með sér alla menn
sína, bæði frelsingja ok þræla, fór síðan norðr á Sandnes til bús
síns. Hafði Þórólfr þar eigi minna fjölmenni ok eigi minni
rausn.¹⁰⁰

By taking his entire household with him Þórólfr is maintaining his power and status despite losing a piece of land. Soon after King Haraldr attacks Þórólfr's farm and sets fire to the house, but first: “Konungr lét kalla at stofunni ok bað ganga út konur ok ungmenni ok gamalmenni, þræla ok mansmenn.”¹⁰¹ That is, all of the dependents may leave the house, but Þórólfr and his free followers are forced to remain to the house and face the attack. These followers are people of high status who have chosen to connect themselves to a powerful lord. One such is Þorgils gjallandi: “hann var heimamaðr Þórólfs ok hafði af honum mesta

⁹⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 52.

virðing húskarla hans. Hann hafði fylgt Þórólfi, þá er hann var í viking, var þá stafnbúi hans ok merkismaðr.”¹⁰² As should be clear by now the terms that are used to describe characters of lower status are often indistinct, with words like *húskarl* being used for everything from the lowliest slave to standard bearer. Often it is only from the narrative context that the actual status of a character is known.

In these opening chapters we see the tensions around changing social structure, but one which is still dependent upon a system of lords and followers and in where wealth and power are strongly tied to free and bound household members. Free men, freed men, bondsmen and slaves all form distinct categories but the real tensions lie in the changing hierarchies of the upper most classes.

The society first described is of Kveldúlfr and his son's time in the mid 9th century. Later in the saga, probably around the beginning of 10th century after the kingship has become more stable, Egill travels to Norway. While Egill runs into as many troubles with kings as the rest of his family, kingship seems to be more or less accepted in Norway by its residents.

As a final note on slavery in Norway, there is the battle over inheritance which Egill becomes involved in when his wife, Ásgerðr's, father dies and both he and her half-sister's husband fight over who has legal right to their father-in-law's lands and wealth. The entire matter hinges around whether or not Ásgerðr's mother, Þóra, may be considered to be slave or not. Þóra, a landowner's daughter, was taken by Bjorn against her father's wishes but ultimately with his consent. Berg-Onundr, the son-in-law, demands of a court: “[...]at þeir dæmi mér allan arf Bjarnar, en dæmi Ásgerði ambátt konungs, því at hon var svá getin, at þá var faðir hennar ok móðir í útlegð konungs.”¹⁰³ This offers another image of what slavery could be: someone taken against their family's will making them a concubine rather than a wife. With much of *Egils saga* it complicates our notion of what slavery was, in this case it simply seems to mean someone under someone else's power against their or their families' will. When Þóra and Ásgerðr are called slaves it is very clear that something different is meant than when Þórólfr packs up his bondsmen and slaves and moves house with them. This

¹⁰² Ibid., 33.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 156.

instance also highlights the hereditary nature of classes and the importance of one's ancestry in Scandinavian society.

IV.3 SUMMARY

The general system which we are witnessing here is one which is dominated by wealthy, landed families who, in theory, owe allegiance to no one. This seems to be the ultimate idea of freedom in both Scandinavia and Iceland, to owe no one your time or labor. Yet, it seems unlikely that this was a reality for many individuals who were often beholden to wealthy and powerful families whether through vertical or horizontal bonds.

Below this highest level were landowners of less wealth, power and family standing. This group ranged widely from people who were comfortably well off to people who seem to have farmed always on the edge of poverty. Depending upon one's wealth they may have a whole range of dependents who were more or less beholden to them. This list could include: children, foster-children, tenants, free workers, freed workers, bonded workers, and, at some points, slaves. As with the farmers these people too could range in status depending upon a number of factors including: the quality of their work, how long they had been at a particular farm, their relationships, and genealogies. It is important to remember that while most people probably stayed in the same class, there are some who seem to have moved around a lot or where forced down through circumstance or hardship.

In Scandinavia, the addition of the monarchy changed this system but did not render it unrecognizable. It seems that here there was already a stronger pattern of local lordships than there ever was in Iceland. In both systems, gift economies representing friendships were important in the early part of the period and framed many of the interactions between classes. It is in these inter- and intra-class relationships that the structure of the society is revealed as they navigate through the system.

IV.4 CLASS MARKERS

In a society so hierarchically structured there had to be methods of differentiating between classes. Up to this point, the main distinguishing features discussed have been those attached to ownership of land and farms, and the support of people. However, there are many class markers used in the sagas to help characters distinguish one another. While the most

obvious of these is owning a farmstead, this does not help distinguish an individual class standing on meeting them.

While it can often seem like characters in the sagas all know one already, this is frequently not the case. Often, characters are introduced or meet by chance and in these cases their credentials are usually part of this first encounter. Frequently, people in the sagas know one another by reputation rather than by sight. The episode in *Njáls saga* when Gunnarr goes to visit Hrútr dressed as a merchant is a good example of this. Njáll sends Gunnarr to visit another farmer, Hrútr, so that he can bring a court case against him. However, if Gunnarr were to go himself Hrútr would not tell Gunnarr how to summon him, so Njáll sends Gunnarr in disguise:

“Nú skalt þú ríða heiman víð þriðja mann; skaltu þú hafa váskulf yztan klæða ok undir söluváðarkyrtil mórendan; þar skalt þú hafa undir in gúða klæði þín ok taparøxi í hendi.”¹⁰⁴

The ruse works and is only discovered when a serving man notices that Gunnarr has fine clothes on under his merchant’s attire, at which point his identity is guessed.¹⁰⁵ Gunnarr’s name is well known but, in order for the disguise to work, his face cannot have been. What constitutes a disguise, therefore, is a change in name, occupation, and clothes. It helps, as well that Gunnarr takes companions with him who “confirm” his false identity.¹⁰⁶

Word of mouth is probably the most valuable class marker within the sagas. Having trusted people to vouch for you was crucial. However, this is actually a secondary step in class marking as it comes in after the initial assessment of an individual. What is particularly important in Gunnarr’s disguise are his clothes. Even more telling is the fact that he keeps his nice clothes on underneath.

Clothes, in the sagas, make the man. As an expensive and rare commodity fine and colorful clothes are used of social markers. In *Grettis saga*, there is an example of how this works from a distance, when a farmer’s wife is spotted at a distance:

¹⁰⁴ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 59.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

Þá sáu þeir ríða þrjá menn neðan eptir dalnum; var einn í litklæðum. Þeir gátu að þar myndi Þorbjörg húsfreyja ór Vatnsfirði ok svá var.¹⁰⁷

Earlier in the saga when Grettir goes to attack his childhood nemesis Auðunn, he first dresses up: “Grettir barsk á mikit og reið í steindum sǫðli, mjög vǫnduðum er Þorfinnur gaf honum; hann hafði góðan hest og vápn ǫll in beztu.”¹⁰⁸ In each case, the fine clothes act as a status marker of the individual. The same is true in *Hrafnkels saga* when Sámr first encounters Þorkell, as his clothes mark him out as a man of distinction.¹⁰⁹

As was shown in *Hrafnkels saga*, people of higher rank had servants to do their work for them. Therefore, when people were seen to be doing work thought to be below their status without demonstrations of their wealth, such as fine clothes, they were considered to be less powerful. In *Grettis saga* we find the following passage: “Þórhalli var vant hesta tveggja ljósbleikra, ok fór sjálfr at leit; af því þykkjask menn vita, at hann var ekki mikilmenn.”¹¹⁰ There is nothing in the saga to say that they were wrong in their judgements either.

Connected to this line of thought are class based insults. These are usually made in reference to someone’s appearance or lack of servants. *Grettis saga* can again provide an example when Grettir attempts to goad Auðunn:

Auðunn mælti: 'Þannig var óspakliga farit, eða hvert er ørendi þitt?' 'Ek vil berjask við þik,' sagði Grettir. 'Sjá mun ek fyrst ráð fyrir mat mínum,' sagði Auðunn. 'Vel má þat,' sagði Grettir, 'ef þú mátt eigi ǫðrum mǫnnum at því hlíta.'¹¹¹

After this insult the fight begins in earnest. As an honor based culture, to maintain rank was important, but, perhaps, also was knowing one’s place within the system. As we shall see later on in the Eddic material these same class markers, or lack there of, were just as important in mythic society.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 168.

¹⁰⁸ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, 95.

¹⁰⁹ “Hrafnkels saga freysgoða”, 111.

¹¹⁰ *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, 109.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 95.

V. Mythic Society

V.1 UPPER CLASSES

In the Eddic material we find a system of stratified society as clearly as in the sagas, laws and archaeological record. As in human society, there is a powerful upper class, which is supported by, and supports, a complex system of less powerful loyal, dependent, or enslaved beings. To begin with the upper classes, we shall start with Kristen Hastrup's description of 15th century Iceland:

The procedure of throwing the high-seat pillars overboard and let them determine the immigrants' home, was a way of linking men to particular places through fate. By 1400, when my analysis begins, access to land was still to some extent a matter of fate. It was no longer augured by high-seat pillars but rather by birth into a particular natural or social environment. In this environment the landowners were in a minority. Other categories dominated numerically, but as every Icelander had to belong to a farm, the landowners retained their structural dominance.¹¹²

While this description is very general and about a later period, it presents a useful picture of the basis of Nordic social power. As has been discussed above, in human societies the landowners constituted the highest echelon of the society. They gained this right through a lucky combination of personal merit and hereditary standing.

The main visual indicator of this land ownership were the grand halls and large farms supported by wealthy families. While landowners were involved in daily life and the work of their homesteads, they were also free to choose what they did with their time, and also acted as warriors, merchants, and travelers. They lived in a world of complex political organization bound by honor codes and motivated by ideals of personal freedom. This is evident in the Icelandic literature and history, as early settlers chose to move and leave everything behind in Norway rather than submit their lives to a king's whims. This submission, as is evident from *Egils saga* and *Grettis saga*, was considered to be a form of slavery. In the Eddas, the beings who fit the criterion of large landholders with free claim on their time are the Æsir and the Jǫtnar.

¹¹² Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland*, 81.

Placing the Æsir and Jǫtnar within the same social sphere is not a unique idea. Lotte Motz has pointed out that alone among the named mythic groups,¹¹³ they are said to live in *staðir* (halls) and that in this aspect the two groups resemble one another.¹¹⁴ She further expounds this point:

The resemblance of the dwelling places [of the Æsir and Jǫtnar] finds a counterpoint in the similarity and kinship of the hostile groups; both appear as powerful dynasties, contending for the rule of the world, matching wits and strength of arms, worthy opponents of one another. We find indeed, also, instances of intermarriages, friendship and rendered help between the two; and we must remember that the gods have descended from giants.¹¹⁵

This idea of worthy opponents is one of the first steps away from theories of binary opposition which have clung to these groups for so long. In Motz's reading we see two groups of similar abilities and social desires jockeying for position.

Margaret Clunies Ross maintains some of the ideas of oppositional otherness in the Æsir/Jǫtnar relationship, but she sees the similarities between them as important:

Consideration of the attribute of social relations indicates once again that the gods and giants are the focal groups of the Old Norse mythic world. While it is true that the opposition between them on a number of levels constitutes a dominant focus of the myths, the similarities between them are equally striking when we consider this attribute together with that of kinship. Not only are the gods and giants blood relations, as we have seen, but they live in comparable social groups and are motivated by comparable interests of a social kind. This similarity is manifest in even the smallest and apparently oddest details of the myths.¹¹⁶

Kristen Hastrup has proposed a system of strict differentiation of between “inside” and “outside” in the Norse world.¹¹⁷ This system suggests an “us against them/ the world” world view which has been used to support the categorical and oppositional binaries of these

¹¹³ That is Æsir, Vanir, Jǫtnar, Álfar, and Dvergjar.

¹¹⁴ Lotte Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain: Form, Function, and Significance of the Subterranean Smith: a Study in Folklore*. (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1983), 89.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. 1.*, 60.

¹¹⁷ Kristen Hastrup, *Island of Anthropology*. (Viborg: Odense University Press, 1990), 26 -28.

worlds. Clunies Ross has challenged this notion by suggesting instead a system of “concentric half circles” in which opposing social groups lived and interacted, and whose cosmic affiliations were based not on inherent racial properties, but on their connections to the human world.¹¹⁸ Indeed as shall be discussed in the next section, the world of the Eddas appears to be far more integrated than a strict inside-outside system, with the homes and life styles of the Æsir and the Jǫtnar paralleling one another.

John Lindow has also argued in support of an Æsir upper class, but places the Jǫtnar in a lower category of hierarchy:

The æsir consist of the æsir proper and an assimilated and hierarchically lower group, the vanir; the jǫtnar, too may consist of various groups, for there are terms which may not be synonymous with Old Icelandic jǫtnar (*[hrím-]þursar*, *berg-risar*, etc), but they do not appear to be arranged hierarchically.¹¹⁹

However, basing his theories heavily off of Clunies Ross, he actually uses the lack of obvious social ordering within Jǫtnar society as an indicator of their inferiority:

The lack of information on hierarchy among the jǫtnar indicates their inferior status in the mythology; they are the opponents of the æsir.¹²⁰

Aside from the confusing collection of terms, of which an equally complex jumble could be made for the Æsir¹²¹, there is nothing to really suggest this lack of social structure. Rather, it seems that in Lindow’s reading has a particular bias towards class which shows itself in his statement: “As befits the inferior status of the jǫtnar, we have less detail on individuals[...].”¹²² It seems far more likely that we have less information on the Jǫtnar because of the perspective of the narrators rather than an inferiority of being. However, despite my disagreement with Lindow’s assessment of this point, his basic approach remains useful.

¹¹⁸ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. 1*, 54.

¹¹⁹ Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, 13

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ The Æsir are variously called æsir, goð, and regin, not to mention the *vanir* and *álfar* whose affiliations to the æsir are not certain.

¹²² Ibid.

As has been discussed in the above section on myth, storied social structures often reflect those of human society. In the structure section, we have seen that in the Norse world the upper class's existence was based on the support and existence of the lower classes. Lindow, working from the base of Miller and Clunies Ross, offers the following statement in his introduction:

It must be clear by now that I regard the mythology as, in one sense at least, about establishing and maintenance of hierarchical social structures.¹²³

He follows this with a discussion of the various ways in which Æsir society appears similar to that of medieval Scandinavia:

[T]he æsir live at various homesteads [...] According to *Grimnismal* 7, Odin and Sága drink at and presumably inhabit Sökkvabekkr, and this is an indication of the nature of the units that make up these homesteads, namely families, presumably extended families including minor and perhaps even grown children as well as servants (e.g. Skírnir) and domestic animals. These households parallel those of medieval Scandinavia, including Iceland the repository of the tradition.¹²⁴

Unfortunately, this is the closest to a discussion of servants and of the lower classes that Lindow ever really comes. Clunies Ross, whose book *Prolonged Echoes*, looks deeply at social structures and classes only does so *between* the Æsir and the Jǫtnar. In other words, both Lindow and Clunies Ross stay within the horizontal class without delving further into the vertical levels of hierarchy.

V.2 LOWER CLASSES

The lower classes in the Eddas tend to be made up beings belonging to no named society. While there have been many suggestions that the Álfar, Vanir, and Dverggar may have been of lower classes than the Æsir and Jǫtnar, this has proven a complicated statement to make.¹²⁵ Instead, what we find are characters who seem to have no affiliations to “racial” or societal

¹²³ Ibid., 16.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹²⁵ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes Vol. 1*, 54; Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain*, 89; and Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods*, 13.

groups of their own. Despite this it is clear that they are of lower classes than the Æsir and Jǫtnar. This may come in the form of explicit labeling as servants or slaves, or may be implied by things such as labor or dress.

As in the sagas, it is clear that there was a distinction between ranks of lower class characters. While this will be discussed in more detail in the following section, the basic split between slaves, bondsmen and women, servants, hired workers, and followers/helpers that existed in human society also is present in the mythic realms. The categories of upper class servants, such as companions, followers, and messengers, are also all present within the tales. Similarly, we find splits between older and younger generations with children ready to take on tasks for their parents, probably in the hope of rewards and distinction. However, we shall now leave the theoretical behind and move into a close reading of the poems themselves.

VI. Poems

VI.1 RÍGSPULA, HYNDLULJÓÐ, HÁRBARÐSLJÓÐ: CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

In different ways *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð*, and *Hárbarðsljóð* all demonstrate the importance of class within the Eddic material. Without overly complex plots, each illuminates a separate aspect of the social structure. We shall begin with *Rígsþula*, as the most blatant, but also the most controversial of these poems.

Rígsþula describes the travels of Rígr, who is most often conflated with the áss Heimdallr, as he travels around encountering various couples. After he leaves each home, the woman gives birth to a child, who is the embodiment of a particular social class. From the first child, Þræl, come the slaves; from the second, Karl, come the farmers; and from the third, Jarl, the noble classes.¹²⁶ It is from this poem that the three part social structure comes. By itself, this poem would make a good case for the mythic origins of classes; however, there is a lot of controversy over its origins which calls the reality of this structure into question.

Rígsþula is not one of the *Codex Regius* poems; instead, it first appears in *Codex Wormianus* [AM 242 fol], a mid 14th century Icelandic manuscript containing *Snorra Edda*.

¹²⁶ “Rígsþula,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenskt Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014), 450 - 455, stz 7 - 32.

Its authenticity as part of the Norse tradition has been questioned on multiple occasions. Ruth Mazo Karras has argued that this poem, with its three part social structure ending with a noble class, “does not reflect Icelandic social structure at any period”, and that the closest Scandinavia cultural match would be that of 13th century Norway.¹²⁷ She maintains that it is a 13th century creation that is representative only of how 13th century people imagined the past.¹²⁸ It is also possible that the poem is not of Nordic origin at all as it has been argued that the Rígr is actually from the Irish word *Rí*, meaning king, and that their class structure here looks far more like an Irish system than a Nordic one.¹²⁹ Despite its dubious origins, the poem at some point found its way into the tradition, and while perhaps not useful for understanding the class system, it nevertheless shows that class and social structure, at least in the 14th century, were considered worthy material for mythic poems.

Hyndluljóð, like *Rígsþula* is not found in the *Codex Regius*, instead it appears in the late 14th century Icelandic manuscript, *Flateyjarbók*. However, as it is also referenced in *Snorra Edda* where it is connected to an older poem *Völuspá him skamma*. It is therefore assumed to be much older than the 14th century.¹³⁰

Hyndluljóð is a far more subtle variation of the preoccupation with class and classification. In this poem, Freyja goes to ask Hyndla about the lineage of Óttar, Freyja's lover. While this may seem an innocent enough request what Freyja actually asks of Hyndla is that she recount who among his ancestors is of the *landowning class*:

“Nú láttu forna/ niðja talða/ ok upp bornar/ ættir manna: Hvat
er Skoðunga,/ hvat er Skilfinga,/ hvat er Qðlinga,/ hvat er
Ylfinga hvat er hólðborit/ hvat er hersborit.¹³¹

More importantly, Hyndla eventually complies, specifically noting which ancestors are of landowning, royal, or warrior classes.¹³² If Óttar has any ancestors of lower birth then they

¹²⁷ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 61- 62.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²⁹ Gísli Sigurdsson, *Gaelic Influence in Iceland: Historical and Literary Contacts: a Survey of Research*, 2nd Edition. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2000), 82.

¹³⁰ *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, 280.

¹³¹ “Hyndluljóð,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 462, stz 11.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 462-3, stz. 13-18.

are not mentioned in the poem, either implying that his lineage is entirely upper class or skipping over less valued ancestors.

The recitation of genealogy is an old tradition in the Nordic world. There is evidence that genealogies were the earliest written tradition Iceland.¹³³ Clunies Ross argues that in Icelandic society:

The key names within the genealogies carried with them knowledge about the circumstances of individuals' births, marriages and deaths as well as details about where they took up land, their farms, conflicts they were involved in, journeys they undertook and so forth.¹³⁴

The recitation of a genealogy is then the recitation of one's credentials and proof of class standing. Classes, as has been mentioned, were mostly determined by heredity, though personal prowess was also important. Not knowing all of the circumstances for Freyja's inquiry, it seems that part of her wish to hear Óttar's ancestry is to check the appropriateness of her coupling with Óttar. It is only after Hyndla has described his lineage that she will admit that is he, in the form of a boar, that she is riding.¹³⁵

Hárbarðsljóð, unlike the previous two poems, is not primarily concerned with class; rather, it is a verbal battle between Þórr and Harbarðr. Yet, through this interaction we can see how class was integrated into the mythic world. Most famously are the lines near the end demarcating which Æsir "get" which humans after death: "Óðinn á jarla/ þáer í val falla,/ en Þórr á þræla kyn."¹³⁶ While it would be easy to doubt the veracity of this statement as it is intended as an insult, the fact both that it is an insult and that there is attention to these class distinctions is important. Earlier in the poem, the insults which the two characters trade are often classicist remarks. Harbarðr calls Þórr a beggar, a horse-thief, and a highwayman, each one an assessment of character and status apparently based on appearance, saying "Þeygi er sem þú þrjú bú góð eigir."¹³⁷

¹³³ Clunies Ross *Prolonged Echoes*, Vol. 2, 86.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³⁵ "Hyndluljóð," 468, stz. 45.

¹³⁶ "Hárbarðsljóð," *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenskt Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 2014), 393, stz 24.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 390, stz. 6, 8.

Around the same time as this exchange Þórr asks the ferryman: “hverr á skipit/ er þú heldr við landit?”¹³⁸ The ferryman responds immediately with the name of his master: “Hildólfr sþa heitir/ er mik halda það/ rekr inn ráðsvinni/ er býr í Raðseyjarsundi.”¹³⁹ This interaction, along with the closing lines, demonstrate that these characters are intimately familiar with a class system, as implicit in the question and the answer is the understanding that a ferryman would not be his own master. Hárbarðr answers the question at once and, at the same time, cites his authority as having come from his master. The expectation and permission both say much about how people understood rank, class and power at the time.

VI.2 SKÍRNISMÁL: SERVANTS, FOLLOWERS, AND UNDERSTANDING POWER

The poem *Skírnismál* begins when Freyr catches sight of Gerðr in her father’s courts in Jötunheimr. He quickly falls into a depression which concerns his parents, here given as Njorðr and Skaði, who approach Freyr’s servant, Skírnir. They ask Skírnir to speak with Freyr in order to discover and ease Freyr's malaise.

Skírnir is Freyr’s *skósveinn*, a word literally meaning shoe-boy and alternatively translated as either servant or page.¹⁴⁰ From the use of this word it seems clear that Skírnir is in service to Freyr, however, his exact status is rather unclear. Skírnir reminds Freyr of when “ungir saman várum í árdaga” suggesting that the two have grown up together as companions.¹⁴¹ Yet, when questioned by Gerðr later in the poem he responds “Emkat ek álfa/ né ása sona/ né vissa vana”.¹⁴² Skírnir’s *ætt*, familial, affiliations then remain of dubious origins.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ibid., 390, stz. 7.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 390, stz. 8.

¹⁴⁰ “Skírnir’s Journey,” in *The Poetic Edda*. Trans. Carolyne Larrington. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57, and Dronke, 376.

¹⁴¹ “Skírnismál,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 381, stz. 5.

¹⁴² Ibid., 383, stz. 18.

¹⁴³ Doubtless arguments for his human, *jötunn*, or *dvergjar* origins have been made, but rather than focus on this it seems that perhaps it might be more important that he is not of any defined *ætt* or *kyn*.

While his role and alliances are clear through his connection to Freyr, his relationship to the Æsir is not. The fact that Skírnir is called *skósveinn* is what complicates this relationship as this term is clearly definable. In *Hrafnkels saga*, we find another *skósveinn*:

Inn sétti var skósveinn Eyvindar. Sá var íslenzk at kyni, skyldr honum.
Þenna sveinn hafði Eyvindr tekit af válaðiof flutt þutan með sér ok
haldit sem sjálfan sik.¹⁴⁴

Here again we see the complicated nature of the Icelandic system; where a free merchant and farmers are related to a member of the serving class.¹⁴⁵ However, this boy's status appears to be based on economics rather than on birth, and there is an implication that he could be of a higher class given the proper circumstances. The attention to his origins, his circumstances in Eyvindr's household, and his role in the saga imply that boy is of greater status than a general house servant.

The term *skósveinn* seems to imply a close connection between master and servant, a rather high status, and the possibility of upward mobility. Despite the lack of a courtly setting, the term page may get us closer to the truth than servant. In the case of Skírnir, it seems unlikely that he will transcend his place, but he does seem to be of high status and have a strong connection to Freyr.

In the *Snorra Edda*, Skírnir is called both *skósveinn* and *sendimaðr*¹⁴⁶, messenger.¹⁴⁷ Messengers could be of virtually any rank in society. For instance, in *Hrafnkels saga* when *griðkonar*, female servants, are used as messengers¹⁴⁸; and in *Snorra Edda*, one of Óðinn's sons, Hérmodr, is sent as a messenger to Hel.¹⁴⁹ However, in the Eddas it is far more likely to find messengers who are of higher rank and who are entrusted with carrying out complex tasks and are rewarded for their work. In many ways, Skírnir is closer to being a companion

¹⁴⁴ "Hrafnkels saga freysgoða," 126.

¹⁴⁵ See also *Brennu-Njáls saga* Njáll's relationship to Guðfinnu Þórólfsdóttur, a *matselja heim*, housekeeper, in his house and *frændkona Njáls*, a kinswoman of his (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, 103).

¹⁴⁶ Sturluson, "Gylfaginning", 28.

¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that while Skírnir appears in both Eddas the story of *Skírnismál* is not the same in each. This is most striking in the manner of his sending. In the *Poetic Edda*, Skírnir simply tells Freyr what he needs and sets off on the journey without Freyr ever asking him: "Skírnismál," 381, stz. 8. In *Snorra Edda*, Freyr directly orders Skírnir to go on his behalf: Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 31.

¹⁴⁸ Hrafnkels saga freysgoða," 127.

¹⁴⁹ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning* "Gylfaginning", 46.

to Freyr than a servant; that is, one who has offered his loyalty to Freyr and is bound by words and deeds rather than strict ownership or legal circumstances. In both the *Poetic Edda* and *Snorra Edda*, he is rewarded for his services with goods and praise, rather than simply acting out of expectation.¹⁵⁰ However, Skírnir is not the only lower class character in this poem.

When Skírnir arrives at Gymir's halls seeking Gerðr, he first meets her *hirðir*, shepherd. The two bandy words outside until Gerðr sends her *ambátt*, bondswoman, out to fetch Skírnir.¹⁵¹ The existence of these two characters, though unnamed, is not insignificant, as both act as status markers within the narrative. Within the Norse world, these characters act as indicators of wealth and, therefore, social and political importance. ,

Gerðr does not go herself to see who is outside and neither does she bring the visitor in. Rather, she sends her serving woman to do it for her. This same pattern is repeated again and again in the sagas. *Hrafnkels saga* is again a good demonstration of this; when Freyfaxi neighs outside the door, Hrafnkell sends a serving woman to see who is there, and the next morning sends someone out to catch a horse for him.¹⁵² On the other hand, when Hrafnkell's neighbor Þórbjorn is described, it is said that he “nú tekr hann hest sinn”, implying that he has no one to do it for him.¹⁵³ Through the use of Skírnir, the herdsman, and the maid, the statuses and high ranks of Njorðr, Skaði, Freyr, Gymir, and Gerðr, are established and demonstrated. It is worth noticing here that despite Gymir being a jötunn, living in Jötunheimr, and Freyr living in Ásgarðr servants are used as social markers in both place and the characters of each society understand how to interact with this class system.

Skírnir is not simply a messenger; rather, he is a negotiator and an extension of Freyr's power. This is not to imply that he is, as Ursula Dronke suggests, an allegorical aspect of Freyr's sun powers as an “awakening shaft of light and warmth” going where Freyr cannot, but, rather, that in a world of classes and master/servant relationships he is an extension of Freyr's power as an high ranking individual.¹⁵⁴ When reading *Hrafnkels saga* we would not

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ “Skírnismál,” 382-3, stz. 11, 15,16.

¹⁵² “Hrafnkels saga freysgoða,” 104.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵⁴ Dronke, *The Poetic Edda, Volume II*, 399.

say that the woman opening Hrafnkell's door was literally understood to be an extension of his hand, but she is a representation of his power and wealth. By sending someone else in his place, Freyr is demonstrating his own importance. That Skírnir seems to be a being of some accomplishment, apparently riding through walls of fire and having command of both martial and magical skill, would also enhance Freyr's standing, as one so powerful is loyal to him. However, this endeavor is not without concern or cost for Freyr.

When Skírnir returns home he finds Freyr awaiting him in the courtyard who asks Skírnir to tell him the news *before* he has left the saddle: “Segðu mér þat, Skírnir,/ áðr þú verpir sǫðli af mar/ok þú stígir feti framarr”.¹⁵⁵ Specifically, Freyr asks Skírnir: hvat þú árnaðir/ í jǫtunheima/ þíns eðamíns munar”.¹⁵⁶ This interaction implies that Skírnir is still in full possession of his own will and the choice to act on his own account rather than that of his master. In exchange for his work, Skírnir is rewarded well. While it is not mentioned in *Skírnismál*, according to the *Snorra Edda*, he gets to keep both Freyr's horse and sword.¹⁵⁷ In another tale from the *Snorra Edda*, Skírnir is sent down to Svartálfaheim by the Æsir to commission the strongest of fetters from the dverggar.¹⁵⁸ His successful return enables the binding of Fenrir and Skírnir again gains the thanks of the Æsir. In each case, Skírnir is given tasks that befit not a slave or a humble servant but someone much closer to his master, someone more like the warriors or *hirð* of Scandinavia lords engaged in a system of reciprocal giving.

VI.3 PRYMSKVIÐA: TRAPPINGS OF WEALTH AND CHANGING CLASS

Many of the patterns found in *Skírnismál* are also to be found in *Drymskviða*. Here Loki is sent to Jǫtunheimr to discover the fate of Þórr's hammer. Once this mission is successfully carried out Loki returns to Ásgarðr to tell Þórr the news. The returning scene here mirrors almost exactly the one in *Skírnismál*: Loki returns to find Þórr waiting in the courtyard and is asked to recite his news before leaving the vehicle of his transportation, in this case the air

¹⁵⁵ “Skírnismál,” 388, stz. 40.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 388, stz. 40.

¹⁵⁷ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

and his falcon form “Segðu á lopti lǫng tíðindi”.¹⁵⁹ It is worth pausing here to take a closer look at the interactions in this opening of the story.

Loki’s character has, and probably will be, much debated by everyone who has stumbled across his tales. However, reading for servants in the myths offers an interesting perspective on his being. *Þrymskviða* opens with Þórr speaking to Loki about the loss of his hammer.¹⁶⁰ Like Skírnir traveling for Freyr, Loki goes on Þórr’s behalf. Perhaps this is because Loki can move more quickly or use the falcon cloak when Þórr cannot, but it also seems that for Þórr to go himself would lessen his status. In this instance, it seems that Loki is acting as Þórr’s servant in much the same way that Skírnir acts as Freyr’s. While this may seem a bit of a stretch on its own, taken with the rest of the poem this idea may seem more plausible.

The second half of the poem tells the story of how Loki and Þórr dress as women and ride into Jǫtunheimr in order to retrieve Þórr’s hammer from Þrymr. However, Loki goes dressed as Þórr’s *ambátt*, maid. While Þórr is reluctant to dress as a woman, he does so without ever losing his class standing. He goes on the trip dressed as an upper class woman, namely as Freyja. The text describes in great detail the exact clothes which he wears; “Bundu þeir Þór þá/ brúðarlíni/ ok inu mikla/ meni Brísinga,/ létu und honum/ hrynja lukla/ ok kvenváðir/ um kné falla,/ en á brjósti/ breiða steina,/ ok hagliga/ um hǫfuð typpðu”.¹⁶¹ The final piece of this disguise can be said to be the addition of a maid.

Both Freyja and Frigg have serving women or messenger, Gná and Fulla respectively.¹⁶² Along with Gerðr’s serving maid, it seems that this is something to be expected of women of higher ranks. Loki’s disguise as Þórr’s maid is, therefore, both a disguise of himself, and part of Þórr’s disguise as a woman of the Æsir. Þrymr, himself portrayed as a wealthy farmer: “Þrymr sat á haugi,/ þursa dróttinn,/ greyjum símun/ gullbǫnd snøri/ ok mǫrum sínum/ mǫn jafnaði”, seems to find nothing suspicious about the

¹⁵⁹ “Þrymskviða,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 423, 10.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 422, stz. 1-2

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 425, stz. 19.

¹⁶² Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 30; and “Grímnismál,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 368.

accompanying maid or that she should speak on behalf of her mistress later in the poem.¹⁶³ Again, we are seeing the acceptable non-servility of servants and the importance of their presence in the tales. Without Loki speaking on her “mistresses” behalf the ruse would be discovered and the hammer lost.

This poem offers two perspectives on Loki. The first is a question: was Loki ever understood as a high ranking servant of the Æsir, rather than a member of this group himself? His companionship and interactions with Þórr, and Óðinn, in this and other poems could support this. However, regardless of what Loki once have been, at the time of writing Loki was considered to be a (tentative) member of the Æsir, and as such he is a character of high rank in the mythological world. The second view of Loki has to do with his shapeshifting ability. It is well known that Loki is able to shift species and gender, but it seems that he is also able to shift rank. This idea of rank shifting is one that we shall return to; however, it appears to be a power wielded by a few of the gods as part of their ability to carry out tasks that they could not do should appear in their high ranking guises. However, we shall first turn to another view of Loki and his role in the poems.

VI:4 LOKASENNA: VOCAL SERVANTS AND CLASS SHAMING

Lokasenna begins when the Æsir arrive at Ægir’s hall for a feast. In the prose prologue, the list of attendance runs: Óðinn and Frigg, not Þórr but Sif, Bragi and Iðunn, Týr, Njörðr and Skaði, Freyr and Freyja, and Víðarr - Óðinn’s son.¹⁶⁴ The list ends with: “Loki var þar ok þjónustumenn Freys, Byggvir ok Beyla. Margt var þar ása ok álfa.”¹⁶⁵ After this it continues:

Ægir átti tvá þjónustumenn: Fimafengr ok Eldir. Þar var lýsigull haft fyrir elds ljós. Sjálft barsk þar ǫl. Þar var griðstaðr mikil. Menn lofuðu mjök hversu góðir þjónustumenn Ægis váru. Loki mátti eigi heyra þat, ok drap hann Fimafengr.¹⁶⁶

As there is quite a lot happening in these lines we will take some time to examine them. First of all, the order of the lists of the guests is interesting. The list begins the Óðinn and Frigg,

¹⁶³ “Þrymskviða,” 423, stz 6, and 426, stz. 26, 28.

¹⁶⁴ “Lokasenna,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 408.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 408.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 408.

and proceeds down through the Æsir before mentioning the Vanir (and Jǫtnar) members, or younger generation Æsir. There is then a full stop before Loki, and Freyr's servants are mentioned. Heimdallr is not mentioned in this list, though he is present in the hall.¹⁶⁷ While it is hard to say absolutely that this is a hierarchical list, it is not out of the question given that it begins with Óðinn and ends with Freyr's servants. If this could be proved, then it would certainly tell us a great deal about Æsir society.

Next, we encounter Ægir's servants and a description of his feast. The details of this section are all laid out so as to demonstrate Ægir's power. The fact that the absence of servants is worthy of note, implies that this is something both unusual and impressive. While it may seem astonishing to people accustomed to reading Edwardian literature how often lower classes are given voices and roles, this is not a society that attempts to overlook the lower classes, their presence, and absence, here is noted by the Æsir themselves. While it is unclear just exactly what Fimafengr and Eldir, Byggvir and Beyla did they are present and active in the poem. As evidenced by the exchange between Loki and Eldir at the beginning, and by Byggvir and Beyla speaking on behalf of the Æsir against Loki at the end.

The final noteworthy aspect of this opening scene is, again, Loki. We are told that Loki could not stand to hear Fimafengr and Eldir praised.¹⁶⁸ Why precisely Loki should be upset at the praising of servants is unclear; however, this statement in combination with Loki's place in the introductory list and his actions in *Þrymskviða*, adds more weight to the question of what exactly Loki's role among the Æsir was.

This is a poem in which all the named servants speak. After Loki, the first character to speak in the poem is Eldir who tells Loki definitively not to go back inside the hall.¹⁶⁹ While this is the last we hear of Eldir, near the end of the poem both Byggvir and Beyla, Freyr's servants, speak. It is at a point in the poem when the tension is near the snapping point when these, seemingly minor, characters decide to speak. However, more interesting than their words, is a shift that occurs in the poem's format here. Up to this point, the pattern has been: one of the Æsir speaks, Loki refutes/shames them, then another Æsir will speak on the previous character's behalf, thus drawing Loki's attention to themselves, and restarting the

¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, *Snorra Edda* does not list Heimdallr, Byggvir, or Beyla as in attendance of the feast. All of the other characters on the list are the same: Snorri Sturluson, "Skáldskaparmál", 40.

¹⁶⁸"Lokasenna," 408.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 408, stz. 2, 4.

cycle. Byggvir begins normally enough by defending Freyr and admonishing Loki, but as he does so he references Frey's home and lineage: "Veiztu, ef ek øðli ættak/ sem Ingunar-Freyr,/ ok svá sælligt setr".¹⁷⁰ He then makes note of his personal pride at being counted among the guests: "[...] em ek h' r hróðugr/ at drekka Hropts megir/ allir ql saman."¹⁷¹ However, when Heimdallr takes over in the next passage he makes no mention of Byggvir and does not attempt to defend him, rather he simply begins by telling Loki that he, Loki, is drunk.¹⁷² When Beyla speaks after Loki has invoked Þórr, and thus summoned him, she does so to point out Þórr's impending arrival.¹⁷³ Loki insults her just the same, "[...] ókynjan meira/ koma með ása sonum; ql ertu, deigja, dritin."¹⁷⁴ No one answers this flyting; though in this case it is interrupted by Þórr's entrance into the hall.

It is not only the pattern which is unusual in this interaction, the way in which Loki insults Beyla and Byggvir also differs from how he attacks the Æsir. In both cases, he points out their lower status rather than attacking their lineages, past behaviors, physical weaknesses, or sexual behavior. It appears that their class and work are the most shaming aspects that Loki can imagine. While none of the Æsir respond to these insults, the facts of their presence as guests at the feast and their joining of the flyting further illuminates the complex nature of mythic society. We see an inclusive society but one which remains very aware of social rank and individual status.

VI.5 *HYMISKVIÐA*: TRANSFORMING THE PATTERN

Temporally set before, *Lokasenna*, the poem *Hymiskviða*, begins when the Æsir arrive at Ægir's hall and Þórr demands that Ægir brew them ale so that they may have feast. The manner of this asking is rather belligerent: "[...] leit í augu/ Yggs barn í 'Þú skalt ásum/ opt sumbl gøra."¹⁷⁵ Ægir is affronted by this demand: "Qnn fekk jøtni/orðbægin halr,/ hugði at

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 416, stz. 43.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 417, stz. 45.

¹⁷² Ibid., 417, stz 47.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 419, stz. 55.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 419, stz 56.

¹⁷⁵ "Hymiskviða," *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 399, stz. 2.

hefndum/ hann næst við goð;/ það hann Sifjar ver/ sér fær hver,”.¹⁷⁶ While it is unclear precisely what upsets him, it is not unlikely that it is because the Æsir demand that he brew ale for them; that is, to act as a sort of servant to them. In the calculation of his response we are told that he wanted to find a way to get back at Þórr for such a request. His response is a match for Þórr’s demand, when he says that Þórr must first go to fetch the brewing cauldron for him. Essentially, in this moment Ægir is turning the tables back around on the Æsir and turning Þórr into a serving character before he will consent to brew the mead.

While Þórr often seems to take on jobs himself rather than sending servants or messengers to do them, to be *sent* is different than to choose to go. In *Skírnismál*, Skírnir offers to go on the quest himself, in *Þrymskviða* it is unclear if Loki sends himself or is sent; however, in neither poem is a specific order given.¹⁷⁷ Here Ægir has specified both the task and who is to undertake it leaving no room for negotiation. As in the previous poems, Ægir will not undertake the task himself, but by invoking the pattern implies that the one he is sending is his to send.

Despite the manner of his sending Þórr, accompanied by Týr, sets off to the jötunn Hymir’s hall to fetch a cauldron from him.¹⁷⁸ This, and all of the other tasks he performs on the way are very ordinary. Yet, he does each task in a way that is larger than life. Here, again, we encounter a beautiful example of the mythic mundane as Þórr uses ox heads for bait, catches the world-serpent, and carries home whales and boat unaided.¹⁷⁹ It is through the use of the mundane that the extraordinary nature of his actions is demonstrated and understood. As mundane chores turn into epic feats Þórr also is able to turn some aspect of his sending into a mythic quest. He is doing the work of a servant, but he is doing so in a mythic manner, and he is remaining himself the entire time.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 399, stz. 3.

¹⁷⁷ Remember that in *Snorra Edda* Freyr *does* order Skírnir to fetch Gerðr for him. *Snorra Edda* is, in general, more directive towards named serving characters than the *Poetic Edda*. However, this fact is not always apparent in English translations where word choices have been made to make serving characters more servile. For example, Larrington’s translation of *Skírnismál*, where both Freyr and Skírnir refer to each other as *seggr*, man. When Freyr says it to Skírnir it has been translated as *man*, but when Skírnir uses it for Freyr it is translated as *sir*: Larrington, “Skírnir’s Journey, 58.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 400, 5-7.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 403-404 stz. 19-27.

VI.6 “HÉRMÓÐR’S RIDE TO HEL”, *BALDRSDRAUMAR*, “THE MEAD OF POETRY”: SHIFTING RANK

After Baldr’s death in *Snorra Edda*, the Æsir decide to send a messenger to Hel to ask for his return to the land of the living. This is the section is termed “Hérmóðr’s Ride to Hel”:

[...] þá mælir Frigg ok spurði hvern sá væri með Ásum er eignask vildi allar ástir hennar ok hylli ok vili hann ríða á Helveg ok friesta ef hann fái fundit Baldr ok bjóða Helju útlausn ef hon vill láta fara Baldr heim í Ásgarð. En sá er nefndr Hérmóðr inn hvati, sveinn Óðins, er til þeirar farar varð. Þá var tekn Sleipnir, hestr Óðins, ok leiddr fram, ok steig Hermóðr þa þann hest ok hleypti braut.¹⁸⁰

This journey fits perfectly into the pattern of a proxy being sent out to do the work of higher ranking characters. Here, though, we find not a servant but a younger member of the Æsir undertaking the journey, possibly for the prestige and out of love of Baldr. There is a strong parallel between this tale and *Baldrsdraumar*, which shall be discussed shortly, as each begins with the saddling of Sleipnir and a challenging ride to Hel’s hall, followed by an interview with a woman by the gates. This woman asks Hérmóðr “hann at nafni eða ætt” before commenting on his appearance and asking his business.¹⁸¹ Here is the pattern of asking someone’s genealogy at the beginning of the encounter that appears in *Skírnismál*, and is the subject of *Hyndluljóð*. Afterward asking a few questions, Hérmóðr returns home with his news. This story fits far better into the system of class ranking than *Baldrsdraumar*, unless we take into account Óðinn’s ability to change class at will.

The final poem from the *Poetic Edda* that we shall look at is *Baldrsdraumar*.¹⁸² Here Óðinn undertakes a ride to Hel in order to gain information about Baldr’s forth-coming doom: “Upp reis Óðinn,/ aldinn Gautr,/ ok hann á Sleipni/sqðul um lagði;/ reið hann niðr þaðan/ Niflheljar til”¹⁸³ His journey breaks the pattern of other such journeys in the Eddas. The

¹⁸⁰ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 46.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁸² *Baldrsdraumar* does not appear in the *Codex Regius*, but instead in an early 14th century manuscript [AM 748 I a 4^{to}], containing an assortment of Eddic poems. With parallels to *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda*, it is presumed that this poem has older roots and connections to the other Eddic poems.

¹⁸³ “Baldrsdraumar,” *Eddukvæði I: Goðakvæði*, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, Eds. Íslenszk Fornrit. (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenszka Fornritafélag, 2014), 399, stz. 2.

normal pattern, as we have seen in *Skírnismál*, *Drymskviða* and “The Binding of Fenrir”¹⁸⁴ and “Hérmóðr's Ride to Hel” from *Snorra Edda*, is that members of the Æsir use messengers, servants, or proxies to go on such missions. The fact that Óðinn himself makes the journey is remarkable and so is the fact that he goes in disguise.

When Óðinn arrives the *völva* asks him: “Hvat er manna þat,/ mér ókunnra,/ er mér hefir aukit/ erfitt sinni?”¹⁸⁵ To which Óðinn responds: “Vegtamrek heiti,/ sonr em ek Valtams.”¹⁸⁶ This exchange effectively conceals his identity and the inclusions of a father's name helps to perpetuate this deception. This name change also effectively disguises his status among the Æsir, and thus is class. It seems that, like Loki, Óðinn is willing to change his class for his own ends. Very often, these two characters share abilities and methods, and the same can be said of their class shifting.

From the closing lines of the poem it becomes very clear that had Óðinn made this ride dressed as himself and wielding his full rank, the *völva* he summons would not speak with him. Saying “Ertattu Vegtamr/ sem ek hugða,/ heldr ertu Óðinn,/ aldinn Gautr,” on her discovery of his identity, she then ends conversation.¹⁸⁷ It is only through appearing to be other than himself that he is able to speak with her. While Óðinn's propensity for disguise is not a new topic of discussion, but what has been overlooked is that Óðinn is doing more than changing his appearance; he is also changing or disguising his rank. This is something that rarely happens deliberately in the sagas, as when Gunnarr dresses as a merchant in *Njáls saga*.¹⁸⁸ As with Óðinn, Gunnarr's class is revealed at the end of the encounter. In both cases, they take on the role of a lower class character in order to gain access to knowledge they could not as themselves.

The final episode which will be analyzed here is “The Mead of Poetry”, describing another journey of Óðinn's. Coming from *Snorra Edda*, the beginning holds is an excellent example of rank shifting and an interesting cross section of mythic society. The general plot of the beginning is that Óðinn ventures out into Jötunheimr in disguise, and through a

¹⁸⁴ Snorri Sturluson. *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning*, 28.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 446, stz 5.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 447, stz 6.

¹⁸⁷ “Baldrsdraumar,” 448, stz 13.

¹⁸⁸ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, 59-64.

contrived accident and hard work he earns the aid of the jötunn Baugi in attempting to get a drink of the mead of poetry from Bauig's brother, Suttungr.

It begins: "Sjá saga er til þess at Óðinn fór heiman ok kom þar er þrælar níu slógu hey. Hann spyr ef þeir vili at hann brýni ljá þeira. Þeir játa flví."¹⁸⁹ Óðinn then offers to sell the whetstone to the slaves, who have found it to have done an excellent job. When they cannot agree on who will buy it he throws it into the air and they all accidentally kill one another with their scythes. Then:

Óðinn sótti til náttstaðar til jötuns þess er Baugi hét, bróðir Suttungs. Baugi kallaði ilt fjárhald sitt ok sagði at þrælar hans níu höfðu drepizk, en talðisk eigi vita sér ván verkmanna. En Óðinn nefndisk fyrir honum Bolverkr. Hann bauð at taka upp níu manna verk fyrir Bauga, en mælir sér til kaups einn drykk af Suttunga miði. Baugi *kvazk enskis * ráð eiga af miðinum, sagði at Suttungr vildi einn hafa, en fara kvezk hann mundu með Bolverki ok freista ef þeir fengi mjöðinn. Bolverkr vann um sumarit níu mannsverk fyrir Bauga, en at vetri beiddisk hann Bauga leigu sinnar.¹⁹⁰

This passage lays out very neatly several aspects of social class. First, we have the slaves who are seen as part of the economic affairs of Baugi, presumably both for their lives and for the work that they will do. Baugi himself appears as a wealthy landowner who is concerned with the running of his farm.

Óðinn, in the guise of Bolverk has arrived at the farm and is offered lodgings as might be offered to a traveler. His status at this moment is ambiguous as he has only introduced himself as Bolverk. When he offers his services he is entering Baugi's employ as a free man, but one who is then bound for the duration of his contract. However, Bolverk is no ordinary worker, he is worth nine slaves on his own. Óðinn is in disguise as an unemployed free man, but he is still a supernatural one.

¹⁸⁹ Snorri Sturluson, "Skáldskaparmál," 4.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

VII. Conclusions: The Implications Of Servants in Mythology

VII.1 POWER AND SOCIETY

What does it mean for servants and slaves to appear in the mythic poems? First of all, it offers us an opportunity to reevaluate how power, and subsequently “gods”, are understood in Norse mythology. To my knowledge, there has been no real study undertaking questions of where the Æsir’s power came from. In the myths, we do not see acts of ineffable creation, rather we see acts of practical structuring and building of the world, we see everything coming into being through mundane, if extraordinary, means and work. The existence of lower class characters are a part of this mundane - mythic world. Their presence is not purely decorative or descriptive. Rather, they are a part of the system which supports the Æsir and helps to create and transform the world. That is, they are a part of the power of the Æsir as divine beings, just as much as warriors were a part of the power and prestige of their lords.

Secondly, the answer to this question has to do with the society within the mythic world. What we find over and over again in the mythic realm is a world that functions on a day to day basis. It has long been known that the Æsir and Jǫtnar live as humans live; that is they are born, they grow up, they age, they marry, they have sex, they eat and drink, and they die. It makes a great deal of sense, then, that humans should also understand that these beings needed to support themselves, just as humans did, and that they would live in communities, just as humans did. That these societies should reflect one another is by no means a surprise for either the field of mythology or Norse history. When we look at human societies in Scandinavia we do not find the same binary traits that we have been taught to look for in myths. Mythic servants, and the social structures they imply, allow us to take a step back from our notions of what myths “should be” and look again with fresh eyes at the society depicted in the texts. These characters allow for a complicated and multi-faceted mythic world to emerge.

A third answer to this question is that servants and slaves can tell us a great deal about the societies that told and used the myths. While this is a point where it may be difficult to draw firm conclusions it may be possible to do so by looking at how the narratives treat these characters.

VII.2 NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS

Within the myths there seem to be two main divisions between serving class characters: those without whom the narrative would not progress and those whom exist independent of the narrative. In other words, there are characters who play an active role in the poems, and characters that act as scenic or narrative markers. Gerðr's maid is a good example of this second category. Her only function in the poem is to perform tasks that are not crucial to the story, so the story could very easily happen without her. However, her presence tells the audience a great deal about Gerðr and the society in which she lived. Effectively, she is part of the description of Gerðr's character and Gymir's hall. On the other hand, we find characters like Skírnir or Harbarðr who are among the main characters of the myths, without whom the story would not exist. A less extreme example, are the slaves in "The Mead of Poetry"; while unnamed their deaths are necessary for Óðinn's acquiring work with Baugi, and, thereafter, poetry.

This division begs the question of whether the variations in the treatment of servants reveal anything about the Eddas? Are we seeing evidence of older versions and changing traditions? Or are these all the work of one society simply using the characters differently? Something that would suggest a changing tradition is that serving characters in the *Snorra Edda* tend to be treated differently from those in the *Poetic Edda*. This is most evident in *Skírnismál* and its *Snorra Edda* counterpart, as the methods of address used by Freyr and Skírnir are very different.

It is possible that we are witnessing two phenomena at once here. The first is the addition in the *Poetic Edda* of minor lower class characters so as to make it more comprehensible to audiences familiar with, either through experience or story, the saga world. The second is a changing understanding of the religious world in *Snorra Edda* as conceptions of power shifted from a hierarchy supported from the society below, to a Christian one with power comes from above. This desire to understand power in *Snorra Edda* can be seen in the "plot" of *Gylfaginning*, which is effectively a list of questions bent on further understanding the beings called the Æsir and the source of their power. As such, in *Snorra Edda* distinctions of class are very precisely rendered and "serving" aspects of servants are emphasized.

This is not to say that the poems of the *Poetic Edda* are necessarily older or more pure texts, rather that they have different concerns than the *Snorra Edda*, which could

indicate their use in distinct contexts. The *Poetic Edda*, in many ways, appears to share a social structure with the *Íslendingasögur*, more so than does *Snorra Edda*. However, without a more in depth analysis of language and a larger body of works this is impossible to say conclusively. Given how little we know about the origins of the sagas this does not tell us a great deal about the Eddic poems. It is entirely possible that they, and the sagas, are the work of 13th century authors. However, if this is the case it is curious that serving characters in the myths appear in so many different ways; with some servants and masters acting more as leaders and followers, and others as narrative markers. These muddled class lines are not what I would expect of the work of a single generation. However, if the *Poetic Edda* could be proven to be an older body of work, it seems that it did not make it into the written tradition without the culture, or cultures, which preserved it over the years adding their own touches.

VII.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay, I have compared the class systems described in the Eddas to those in the Icelandic sagas with an eye to how characters of upper and lower classes interacted. Through this comparison we see a mythic world which is complex and alive; a world full of mundane and extraordinary events. As such, it seems appropriate to evaluate these texts upon a similar level as we would the world of the sagas, that is as complex, multifaceted, and beyond grandiose generalizations. While there is much to be gained from metaphorical and mythological studies of the Eddic materials, there is also something to be gained from realistic interpretations. It is my hope that by approaching the Eddas from within the context of the cultures who interacted with them we may come to understand some more of the subtleties of use and add new layers of cosmological meaning in the future.

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