

# Postgraduate English

community.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english

ISSN 1756-9761

---

Issue 37

Autumn 2018

Editors:

Gareth Reeves and Olly Teregulova

---

## **Mannakjöt and Mannakrof: Human Identity in *Ketils Saga Hængs* and *Örvar-Odds Saga***

**Rebecca Drake**

University of York

## Mannakjöt and Mannakrof: Human Identity in *Ketils Saga Hængs* and *Örvar-Odds Saga*

**Rebecca Drake**

University of York

Postgraduate English, Issue 37, Autumn 2018

---

The human, consumed, embodies an unsettling reshaping of identity. What follows is an exploration of how human identity is understood in two of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, a small sub-group of the *fornaldarsögur* (Old Norse-Icelandic legendary sagas). These are *Ketils saga hængs* (The saga of Ketill salmon) and *Örvar-Odds saga* (The saga of Arrow Odd). In these heroic saga narratives, identity is key. Primarily, they explore the individual identity of the hero. However, as I argue, this identity is complicated by questions of how the human is understood and problematically defined in relation to the non-human, by which I mean the animal as well as the monstrous.

Among criticism of the *fornaldarsögur*, it is acknowledged that these narratives create an imagined legendary world wherein the human coexists with the monstrous.<sup>1</sup> This juxtaposition between the human and the non-human extends to the formation of human identity within these sagas on two levels. First, on the linguistic level of words used to refer to the human as meat, through which the human is presented as animal. Secondly, on the level of the cultural mindset surrounding the cooking practices of monsters and men, through

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Helen F. Leslie, 'The Matter of Hrafnista', *Quaestio Insularis*, 11 (2010), 169–208; Martin Arnold, "'Hvat er tröll nema þat?": The Cultural History of the Troll', in *The Shadow Walkers: Jacob Grimm's Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by Tom Shippey (Tempe, Arizona: Brepols, 2005), pp. 111–39.

which can be found little distinction between the human and the monstrous. Moreover, two key examples reveal how human identity is understood in these texts. The first of these is Ketill's encounter with the giant, Surtr, who keeps human flesh in his large seaside storage pits. In this episode, the author's use of *mannakjöt* as well as *mannakrof* to designate the human body is both disturbing and significant in relation to how human identity is imagined as dually human and animal. The second example is Oddr's visit to Giantland, in which he eats human flesh stolen from the giant, Hildir. Here, the giant's habit of cooking his meat, in accordance with this same habit of trolls throughout the *fornaldarsögur*, suggests that the human and the monstrous may be only poorly defined, if at all.

My focus is on two of the *Hrafnistumannasögur* (Sagas of the Men of Hrafnista), which are found together in the fifteenth-century manuscript AM343 a 4t<sup>o</sup> (c.1450–1475).<sup>2</sup> The four sagas, as they are often grouped together, are *Ketils saga hængs* (the saga of Ketill Salmon), *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (the saga of Grímr Hairy-cheek), *Örvar-Odds saga* (the saga of Arrow-Odd), and *Áns saga bogsveigis* (the saga of Án Bow-bender).<sup>3</sup> Although they can be grouped genealogically, as per Margaret Clunies Ross's argument, these texts are also unified by their shared exploration of male heroic identity.<sup>4</sup> As such, multiple studies have used the *Hrafnistumannasögur* to explore themes of monstrosity and human identity, with recent discourse focusing on representations of the other through monsters such as trolls, giants, and ogres.<sup>5</sup> I have chosen *Ketils saga* and *Odds saga* because these are narratives

---

<sup>2</sup> Hans Jacob Orning notes that these sagas can be dated back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in other manuscripts, although they do not always appear together. See: Hans Jacob Orning, 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the *fornaldarsögur*', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35 (2010), 3–20. For a detailed discussion of the probable dates of the *fornaldarsögur*, see Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., 'Ketils saga hængs', in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II: Annað Bindi*, (Odds Björnssonar: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976), pp.149–81; 'Gríms saga loðinkinna', in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II*, pp.183–98; 'Örvar-Odds saga', in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II*, pp.199–363; 'Áns saga bogsveigis', in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II*, pp. 365–403.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Society, Vol. 2: The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), p. 95.

<sup>5</sup> See: Helen F. Leslie, 'The Matter of Hrafnista', p. 169; Jeremy DeAngelo, 'The North and the Depiction of the Finnar in the Icelandic Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, 82 (2010), 257–86; Hans Jacob Orning, 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the *fornaldarsögur*', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35 (2010), 3–20.

driven by heroic quests to establish individual human identity; underpinning this, the saga authors deconstruct and decentre definitions of the human.

Both Ketill and Oddr are hybrids, being descended from trolls. Ketill is the son of Hjallbjörn Hálfröll, himself the son of a human-monster union, and is part human, part troll. As Martin Arnold notes, Ketill's propensity to behave in a trollish manner, as is represented in his youth through the *kolbitr* motif, feeds the father/son tension which drives the early part of the narrative, in which Ketill seeks to rise to chieftain status and in doing so supplants his father.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Oddr is the offspring of fluid identities. His father, Grímr loðinkinna, is the son of the aforementioned Ketill (himself hybrid) and the troll-woman Hrafnhildr, and his mother, Lophæna, is a human woman once transformed into a troll-woman through sorcery, whose identity is liable to change from human to monstrous regardless of her genetic inheritance. In these sagas, then, heroic identity is neither fully human nor monstrous, but lies consistently somewhere between the two. Arnold characterises the hybrid troll-human as experiencing reality 'in terms of fracture.'<sup>7</sup> This fracture is caused by discrepancies between two communities: 'the human, which is banal, and the non-human, which is chaotic'.<sup>8</sup> While a degree of definition between the human and the non-human can indeed be found in the realities of *Ketils saga* and *Odds saga*, they also present an uneasy union between the two. Indeed, Arnold also concedes that the non-human world, which he calls 'trolldom', shares social similarities with the human world.<sup>9</sup> I argue that these similarities, manifested by giants, trolls, and ogres' habit of cooking human flesh, suggest these sagas' entirely more complicated cultural understanding of human identity. It is fractured, perhaps, but it is also pieced together with the non-human.

---

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, 'Hvat er tröll nema þat?', p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

In *Ketils saga* and *Odds saga*, an extreme northern setting immediately suggests the presence of the non-human. Throughout the *fornaldarsögur* genre, monsters inhabit the spaces at the edges of human settlements, such as the far north, or the east, as Eleanor Barraclough has explored.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the human must interact in these spaces with monsters in order to gain access to food resources. Leslie explains that, ‘In the Hrafnistumenn sagas the north functions as both a symbolic place of natural chaos and supernatural wonders, and as an important and realistic location for gathering food and trading opportunities’.<sup>11</sup> The imagined human settlements are isolated human communities which must coexist with the non-human, by which I mean the trolls, giants, and ogres living along the northern coastline, to survive. Consequently, these late medieval texts reveal a narrative mindset in which monsters and men must coexist from the outset.

Before examining Ketill’s encounter with the giant, Surtr, in which the author presents a complicated picture of human identity, I consider a key narrative episode in which the young hero’s individual identity is established. *Ketils saga* places great importance on food, especially on acquiring it. Frequently, famine drives Ketill away from Hrafnista in search of food—an adventure which aligns with the hero’s quest for his own identity. In the pursuit of fresh food sources in the fertile lands of the North, Ketill battles fishermen, dragons, and other monsters, asserting his heroic identity with each new victory. On one such occasion, Ketill spies a creature flying above the cliffs. Initially, the saga author describes this creature as a dragon; however, Ketill, having dismembered it, is convinced that it is a large fish. ‘*Ekki kann ek at færa í frásagnir, hvar ek sé fiska renna, en satt var þat, at sundr hjó ek einn hæng í miðju, hvern sem hrygnuna veiðir frá.*’<sup>12</sup> Confusingly, while the saga author refers to the creature as *dreka einn* (a dragon) dragon, the saga’s protagonist thus

---

<sup>10</sup> See: Eleanor Barraclough, ‘Where the Wild Things Are’, in *Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 80–92.

<sup>11</sup> Helen F. Leslie, ‘The Matter of Hrafnista’, *Quaestio Insularis*, 11 (2010), 169–208 (p. 207).

<sup>12</sup> *Ketils saga*, p. 153. (‘I don’t know how that story goes, whether I see the fish run, but that was true, that I struck apart one salmon in the middle as he went from fishing the spawning fish.’)

believes it to be otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Ketill's inability to distinguish one creature from another prompts his father, Hállbjörn, to give him his nickname. Hállbjörn remarks: '*Litils mun þér síðar vert þykkja um smáhluti, er þú telr slík kvikvendi með smáfiskum. Mun ek nú auka nafn þitt ok kalla þik Ketill hæng*'.<sup>14</sup> This ironic episode sets the tone for the rest of *Ketils saga*, in which one creature may be indistinguishable from another, and in which monsters often resemble men.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has famously proposed seven theses defining the monster. The third of these provides a framework for understanding both Ketill's hybrid identity, illustrated in the episode in which he gains his nickname, as well as the state of human identity in this saga. Cohen characterises the monster as 'A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a "system" allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration'.<sup>15</sup> *Ketils saga's* monstrous antagonists defy categorisation. Moreover, while Ketill, a hybrid, shares characteristics with the monstrous, such as superhuman strength and size, his response to eating the human show his difference from them. The hero of *Ketils saga* can be said to defy categorisation in this way, as can the villains, including Surtr, whom Ketill meets later in the narrative. The human in this saga can also be said to defy categorisation, being, as it is, so difficult to separate from the non-human. As such, in the most disturbing of Ketill's encounters with the monstrous, his meeting with the giant, Surtr, the saga author presents the mixed category of the human through precise choice of compound language, which ultimately deconstructs the human and reconstructs it as human-animal hybrid.

---

<sup>13</sup> See: Richard Cleasby and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, eds, *An Icelandic Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> *Ketils saga*, p. 153. ('The custom of drawing small lots must seem of small worth to you, as you count such living creatures with the small fish. I will now add to your name and call you Ketill salmon.')

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25 (p. 7).

Having sailed north from Hrafnista, ‘*fyrir því a fiskinum firrðist landit, en kornárit brást*’,<sup>16</sup> Ketill comes ashore to find a hut on the beach, next to which large pits overflow with fish. However, far from being the much sought-after food source required, these pits are revealed to be inedible. Indeed, upon digging deeper, their sinister nature is revealed:

*Mikinn veiðifanga sá hann þar ok grafir stórar í jörð niðr grafnar, ok reif hann allt upp ór þeim ok kastar út hér ok hvar. Hann fann þar í af hvölum ok hvítabjörnum selum ok rostungum ok alls konar dýrum, en á botninum í hverri gröf fann hann mannakjöt saltat. Allt rat hann þat út, ok spillti hann þar hvívetna.*<sup>17</sup>

These food stores, belonging to the giant, Surtr, contain all manner of creatures hunted from the local environment. These range from fish and other marine animals, to land-based animals, both large and small, to the ominous *mannakjöt*. This, as I argue, represents a hybrid reconstruction of the human as human-animal. Ketill destroys everything in the pits, pulling it up out of them and scattering it. Clearly, he does not intend to eat any of it, despite having come in search of food. This episode occurs late in the narrative, when Ketill has already established his individual identity as chieftain of Hrafnista. Therefore, it seems incongruous as a monster-slaying episode, as all other such episodes have served to build Ketill’s fame, leading to his becoming chieftain, whereas this one does not. Consequently, the narrative episode of the giant’s pits is immediately problematic and unsettling. Its strange place in the narrative sets the scene for an unsettling presentation of human identity, in which the human is linguistically deconstructed.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ketils saga*, p. 168 (because the fish went away from the land, and the crops burned...).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155–56. (He saw great catches of fish there and large pits dug down into the earth, and he dragged everything up out of them and cast it out here and everywhere. He found there whales and polar bears, seals and walrus, and all kinds of wild animals, but at the bottom of these pits he found salted man flesh. He brought all of that out, and spoiled it however he could.)

The giant's pits compress a multitude of corpses within the earth. Fish, whale, bear, seal, walrus, and human share the same purpose within these earthen walls: they all become prey. Thus, they are all assimilated into one form. Having merged an ecosystem, the pits deconstruct the individual identities of the creatures they contain, transforming them into one collective flesh. The human is no longer only the human; instead, it is equivalent to the animal flesh bearing down on it. As such, when interred, fish, whale, bear, seal, walrus, and human, become one and none. Ketill, a hunter, comes face to face with the human as prey, as something that has been caught, preserved in salt, and stored at the bottom of a giant's larder. The strength of his reaction, as he destroys all food in the giant's pits, demonstrates the horror with which he encounters this deconstruction of the human. What is more, in his refusal to accept this altered version of human identity, he reasserts his own.

The giant's pits are accompanied by a sense of horror regarding the physical merging of the human and the animal. The saga author's clever syntactic construction supports the audience's realisation of this horror. By revealing the wild creatures in the pits one layer at a time in a long list, they build a lexical copy of the physical pits, revealing layers of meat which lead the audience down to the final horrific image at the bottom of this word pile: the human as meat. Saved until last, the consumable human is the most horrifying. Moreover, the slow reveal of this horrifying object, the human corpse, gives pause. The author constructs a pit of words, leading the audience down to the very bottom, where they are confronted by the uncomfortable realisation that the human has been brought down, quite literally, to the level of the animal. When the audience, alongside the hero, finally dig up the word *mannakjöt* they are forced to confront its horrific meaning. The *mannakjöt* we find here is no longer the human. Instead, it has transgressed the category of human and has taken on a new identity: that of the animal.

Receptacles of flesh, the giant's pits deconstruct human identity by altering its function. The saga author indicates this decentring of the human through the specific word

choices of *mannakjöt* and *mannakrof*, both of which reveal how the human is transformed from a character with agency into something that can be eaten. Analysis of these words reveals the sense of horror with which the human is transformed. Stephen Mitchell reflects on the hunting connotations of the term *mannakrof*, which the anthropophagic giant Surtr uses to refer to his prized human flesh when he catches Ketill in the act of raiding his storage pits:

‘*Hann var dimmraddaðr ok mæltist við einn saman: "Hér er illa um gengit," sagði hann, "at hrökt er öll eiga mín ok með þat þó verst farit, sem bezt er, sem eru mannkrof mín."*’<sup>18</sup>

Mitchell explains this term as regards its sense of horror:

This term might be rendered 'human flesh', but such a translation would fail to capture the eerie undertones of the phrase: *krof* refers to the butchered carcass of a slaughtered animal, probably being built on the lost verb *krjúfa*, 'to gut, disembowel'. Thus, the well-informed Surtr regards humans not merely as enemies of the giants but as prey animals, food to be hunted, slaughtered, and stored away.<sup>19</sup>

The giant considers humans in terms of how they might be hunted, using the language of hunting to refer to them. The purpose of the giant’s pits is determined by what they contain: hunted, butchered, and stored meat. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that giants, trolls, and ogres, all of which are more or less synonymous, exist as literary depictions of people from the far north, the Sámi.<sup>20</sup> Inger Zachrisson describes the Sámi tradition of using hunting pits, stating that ‘Trapping pits, usually in systems, for catching big game, elk or reindeer, seem once to have characterized Sámi culture’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the pit’s hunting function seems to be supported by the hunting connotations of the noun, *mannakrof*, with which Surtr refers to

<sup>18</sup> *Ketils saga*, p. 156. (He was deep-voice and spoke to himself: “It goes badly here,” he said, “because all my possessions are wrecked and it goes worst with those which are the best, my human carcasses.”)

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Mitchell, ‘The Supernatural and Other Elements of the Fantastic in the *fornaldarsögur*’, in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: The 13th International Saga Conference*, II, ed. by John McKinnel, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Durham: The Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), pp. 609–706 (p. 704).

<sup>20</sup> See: Ármann Jakobsson, ‘Identifying the Ogre: The Legendary Saga Giants’, *Fornaldarsagaerne, myter og virkelighed: studier i de oldislandske foraldarsögur Norðurlanda*, ed. by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann Jakobsson (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), pp. 181–200; Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, *Beyond the Northlands*.

<sup>21</sup> Inger Zachrisson, ‘The Sámi and their interaction with the Nordic Peoples’, in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink, and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 32–39 (p. 37).

the human corpses therein. By extension, the human, once hunted, can no longer retain the identity of hunter. Instead, it is presented as a piece of meat, something to be consumed. In this way, the giant's pits deconstruct and repurpose the human, from hunter to prey.

Ketill reacts badly to this decentring of the human, destroying the giant's pits, as has been seen. His realisation of the hybrid animal-human unsettles him. Focusing on Middle English literature, Karl Steel explains the horror of anthropophagy in terms of how it deconstructs the human: 'Anthropophagy confounds the distinction between human and other animal lives, between what can be murdered and what can only be slaughtered.'<sup>22</sup>

According to Steel, when eaten, the human ceases to carry out the same function as it did before, becoming a thing which may be eaten, rather than something which may eat.

Similarly, *mannakrof* describes the human-to-be-eaten, which is no longer simply the human, and which, in the context of the giant's pits, blurs the distinction between animal and human.

The giant, Surtr, refers to the human as something to be hunted. Moreover, the human body in the giant's pits has been butchered. It is, partially, *krof* (from the verb *kryfja*, to embowel, or the cut-up carcass of a slaughtered animal).<sup>23</sup> No longer whole, it can no longer be designated as the human.

In animal studies, Carol J. Adams proposes a framework for understanding how the female body is consumed in modern English language and culture. This framework is also useful for understanding the horror of the consumed, or consumable, human in *Ketils saga*.<sup>24</sup>

Adams uses the concept of the absent referent to analyse how animals and women can disappear. She notes three ways by which animals can become absent referents: they vanish by being dead; they vanish by definition; or they become metaphors for describing people's

---

<sup>22</sup> Karl Steel, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> Vigfússon Cleasby, *An Icelandic Dictionary*, p. 356.

<sup>24</sup> Necessarily, this article focuses on the male body, being an exploration of human identity through the identity of the saga hero. Nonetheless, Adam's theory as to how the female body disappears through language—the 'absent referent'—can be extended to think about the human body in a broader sense within *Ketils saga*.

experiences, such as when women are compared to pieces of meat in the media or in cases of sexual assault.<sup>25</sup> The second of these absences described by Adams provides a useful frame for thinking about how the human disappears in *Ketils saga*. Adams notes that ‘when we eat animals we change the way we talk about them, for instance, we no longer talk about baby animals but about veal or lamb... the word *meat* has an absent referent, the dead animals.’<sup>26</sup> In the same way, *mannakrof* no longer designates the human, but its absence. Rather than denoting the human body, it refers to a piece of meat. Moreover, this meat has its own referent: *mannakrof*. The giant’s labelling of the human body as such deconstructs the human form, reimagining it as something which exists to be eaten—so it disappears.

Having first deconstructed the human, the giant’s pits episode then reconstructs it as a hybrid of the human and the animal. The saga author uses a different word to describe the human body in the same episode: *mannakjöt*. This has a different meaning, and presents the human as having been fractured, reduced to parts, then rebuilt and reimagined as an animal-human hybrid. *Mannakjöt* is a compound of *manna* and *kjöt* (flesh, meat).<sup>27</sup> Reduced to its component parts, this term presents a series of chilling binaries which reimagine human identity. *Manna* designates the human. Moreover, it connotes living creatures, animated bodies, the components of a human society, and consumers at the top of their food chain. *Kjöt*, on the other hand, connotes the animal (the non-human). However, this animal is dead, a corpse, independent of any human society and frequently consumed by creatures at the top of the food chain. Indeed, these two nouns, *manna* and *kjöt*, are opposites. Therefore, where the giant’s language associates the human with the action of being butchered, connoting horror through the violent act of disappearing, the author’s own choice of words presents this

---

<sup>25</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 1990). As Adams explains: ‘There are actually three ways by which animals become absent referents. One is literally: ... through meat eating they are literally absent because they are dead. Another is definitional: when we eat animals, we change the way we talk about them, for instance, we no longer talk about baby animals but about veal or lamb’ (p. 21). Adams goes on to discuss the third disappearance, through metaphor, throughout this chapter—‘An example of this,’ she says, ‘is when rape victims or battered women say, “I felt like a piece of meat”’ (p. 21).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Cleasby and Vigfússon, *An Icelandic Dictionary*, p. 341.

same sense of horror with greater unease. because the human is reduced to parts in order to be built up again as the non-human, a corporeal animal-human hybrid. Man and meat, the human and the non-human, are unnaturally hybridised in this compound referent, both unified by their ability to be slaughtered. Herein lies the sense of horror in the deconstruction of the human.

*Grágás*, the thirteenth-century collection of Christian laws in pre-Norwegian Iceland, which are roughly contemporaneous with the written composition of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*, gives a detailed definition of what constitutes meat according to Old Norse-Icelandic cultural understanding:

Þat er kiot er men lata af navt eþa fær sauði. oc geitr. oc svín. Ef svín kemr a ros kiot oc scal hann ala .iij. manvþr oc fella holld af. en feita aþra. iij. Ef svín kemr a manz hræ. oc scal ala .vi. manvþr. oc fella holld af. (s. 13, a.) ef hylldz hefir á. en feita aþra .vi. manvðr þa er rett at nýta svín. Biorn egv men at veiþa oc nýta hvart sem er viðbiorn eþa hvitabiorn. oc ravð dýre. hiort oc hrein. Þat scal eta þa er kiot ætt er. Rosm hval oc sel scal eta a þeim tíðum at eins er kiot ætt er.<sup>28</sup>

These laws, although they do not constitute a complete set of Icelandic law codes, suggest that the concept of man-eating as morally wrong exists in the cultural mindset surrounding the composition of the *Hrafnistumannasögur*. Moreover, they present a clear distinction between animal flesh and human flesh, the first of which is meat, and can therefore be eaten, whereas the other is the body. Surtr's *mannakjöt*, blurring the distinction between human and animal, does not adhere to this cultural mindset. It confounds the distinction between man and meat, destabilising how the human is culturally understood. The human in *Ketils saga*,

---

<sup>28</sup> Vilhjálmur Finsen, ed., *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid* (Copenhagen: Trykt i Brodrene berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852), p. 34. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins have translated this passage. "Meat is what comes from slaughtering cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. If a pig gets into horse meat, it is to be kept for three months but starved to shed its flesh and then fattened for three months. If a pig gets into dead human flesh, it is to be kept for six months, and if it has put on weight it is to be starved to shed its flesh and then fattened for six months. Then it is lawful to use the pig for food." See: *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, trans. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), p. 48. It should be noted that the *Grágás* is derived from two manuscripts, the *Konungsbók* (c.1260) and *Staðarholsbók* (1280), and does not contain a unified account of Icelandic law.

therefore, avoids these cultural categories in which the human is distinct from the animal. In this way it may be understood as more akin to the monstrous, as per Cohen's third thesis: in *Ketils saga*, the human is a 'mixed category.'

So far, I have explored how human identity is deconstructed in *Ketils saga*. Oddr, the hero of *Odds saga*, encounters a similar deconstruction of human identity. His response, unlike Ketill's, is far from disgust. Instead of destroying human flesh, that which has repurposed to be eaten, Oddr consumes it. I turn now to the social understanding surrounding how meat is cooked in *Odds saga*, where the expectation that humans cook their meat and monsters do not is swiftly overturned. Far from centring on the horrific implications of hybridity in human flesh-as-meat, as in *Ketils saga*, I argue that *Odds saga* first establishes a distinction between the human and the monstrous, only to then dissemble it. Furthermore, the implications surrounding methods of cooking meat outweigh those of the act of man eating itself. Oddr is drawn into comparison with giants, trolls, and ogres, the monsters of *fornaldarsögur*, because he eats boiled meat.

In the reality of the *fornaldarsögur*, the expectation is that monsters eat men, or it would be more appropriate to say they eat the human. In *Ketils saga*, Surtr is in possession of man carcasses and man meat. Elsewhere in *Odds saga*, the sea monsters Hafgufa and Lyngbakr swallow ships whole.<sup>29</sup> By extension, the audience expects Hildir to be a man-eater, which in all likelihood he is. In addition, they expect a certain distinction between monster and man, defined by the characteristic of each to eat, or not eat, human flesh. The saga author first presents such a distinction, as the giant, Hildir, enters the narrative with a speech eerily echoing that of Surtr, above, in which the ogre mourns his butchered human carcasses. Having discovered the theft of his *soðit kjöt*, Hildir follows the eagle in a boat to its nest, complaining '*Illr fugl er þat, sem hér á bæli, því at hann venst á, dag eftir dag, at stela*

---

<sup>29</sup> *Örvar-Odds saga*, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976), pp. 199–363 (p. 289).

*brott kjöti mínu nýsoðnu*'.<sup>30</sup> Structurally, the giant's speech recalls Surtr's in *Ketils saga*: 'Hér er illa um gengit,' sagði hann, 'att hrökt er öll eiga mín ok með þat þó verst farit, sem bezt er, sem eru mannakrof mín.' Within the *Hrafnistumennasögur* sub-group, the audience already knows of Surtr, the horrifying man-eater who so greatly disturbs Ketill. They might expect to meet another such monster in Hildir, who mourns the loss of his prized meat in parallel syntax to Surtr's speech. Here, then, is a motif with which the audience are familiar, and which complies with their expectations of monsters and men in this saga group. These expectations adhere to the saga's understanding that, whereas monsters eat men, humans should not. However, Hildir's meat, although as much prized as Surtr's, is not human flesh. He ruefully remarks, 'Ætlaða ek þá annat, er ek tók yxnin frá konungi, en fugl þessi skyldi hafa þau.'<sup>31</sup> Rather anticlimactically, it is revealed that Hildir has in fact been boiling the king's *yxnin* (oxen). Having first insinuated a distinction between the human and the monstrous, in which the monstrous eats human flesh, the saga author quickly disassembles it by revealing that this giant does not follow this norm.

The hero's eating practices, as well as the giant's, present another deconstruction of the human non-human binary. Sharing the food of giants, Oddr's hybrid monstrosity is characterised by his eating practices in Giantland. However, the deconstruction here is not achieved, as might be expected, through presenting the hero as a monstrous anthropophogist. Instead, the distinction between human and monstrous is blurred when monsters are shown adopting human cultural cooking practices. Hjálmar's *víkingalög* sets the precedent for human cultural practice regarding food in *Odds saga*.

*Þá mælti Hjálmar: "Þat er fyrst at segja, at ek vil aldri eta hrátt né lið mitt, því at þat er margra manna siðr at vinda vöðva í klæðum ok kalla þat soðit, en mér þykkir þeira sið, er líkari eru vörgum en mönnum."*<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 272. ('That is an evil bird, which comes to my farm, because he is accustomed, day after day, to steal my freshly boiled meat.')

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 272. ('I had another plan, when I took oxen from the king, than that this bird should have them.')

<sup>32</sup> *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 234. (Then Hjálmar said: "This must first be said, that I will never eat raw meat, because there are many men who are accustomed to wrap flesh in cloth and call that boiled, but to me it seems that their custom is more like to wolves than to men.")

Hjálmar declares some methods of cooking meat to be false, such as wrapping raw flesh in cloth and calling it boiled. The humans of *Odds saga*, then, refer to meat which has been cooked in a way that is not socially acceptable as *soðit*. Fittingly, *fornaldarsögur* trolls customarily boil their meat. In *Sörla saga sterka* the saga hero discovers two trolls in a cave, one of whom is cooking horse meat and human flesh in a large kettle over a fire: *Hann sá þar ok eina kerlingu heldr stórmannliga. Hún stóð við þverpall ein ok var at brytja þar niðr mannakjöt ok hrossa ok var harðla stórvirk at þessu.*<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra* the saga hero enters a cave where two trolls are sat cooking both man and horse flesh in a kettle: *Hann gengr at hellisdyrum ok sér, at tvau tröl sátu við eldinn, annat kvensvipt, en annat karlsvipt, ok höfðu soðketil í milli sín. Þar var í bæði hrossa slátr ok manna.*<sup>34</sup> It would be tempting to assume that boiling meat is an activity found only among monstrous cultures.

As Ásdis Egilsdóttir explains, eating raw flesh is an antisocial act among human society. Egilsdóttir focuses on examples of how food reflects cultural identity in the *fornaldarsögur*, analysing these sagas in terms of how food is fundamental to human life and explaining eating as a social act. Indeed, she uses the *víkingalög* in *Odds saga* to prove certain antisocial methods of eating, which are eating raw or rotten meat, cannibalism, and even eating certain types of meat such as horsemeat.<sup>35</sup> She writes: ‘In the *fornaldarsögur*, cooking food separates humans from animals and most giants’.<sup>36</sup> However, boiled meat is

<sup>33</sup> ‘*Sörla saga Sterka*’, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda III*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976), pp. 367–410 (p. 373). (There he saw a giant woman. She stood at the dais, working hard at chopping human flesh and horse flesh.)

<sup>34</sup> ‘*Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*’, in *Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda IV*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976), pp. 287–318 (p. 298). (He went to the cave entrance and saw that two trolls sat by the fire, one female, the other male, and they had a cauldron between them. In it was both horse meat and human meat.)

<sup>35</sup> Ásdis Egilsdóttir, ‘Food and Cultural Identity in the *fornaldarsögur*’, in *Skemmtiligastar Lygisögur: Studies in Honour of Galina Glazyrina*, ed. by Tatjana N. Jackson and Elena A. Melnikova (Moscow: Dmitry Pozharskiy University, 2012), pp. 138–47 (p. 139).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

also cooked meat, albeit dubitably so. Even though trolls boil their meat, they do so in cauldrons, over a fire. This requires significantly more culinary skills than merely wrapping meat in a piece of cloth and calling it boiled, a method of cooking which Hjálmar particularly disdains, likening men who cook in this way to wolves.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the boiled meat of monsters in *fornaldarsögur* is not the same wrapped meat, called *soðit*, mentioned in the *vikingalög*.

Furthermore, it is not only trolls who boil their food in *Odds saga*. Oddr also eats boiled food, which has been cooked in this way by the giant, Hildir. Having been captured by a giant eagle and taken to its nest as an intended snack for its chicks, he ties their beaks together, starving them so that he can have sole choice of all the food the eagle brings to the nest:

*Gammrinn berr at þess fleiri fiska ok fugla ok mannahold ok af alls konar dýrum ok fénaði. Þar kemr um síðr, at hann berr þangat soðið kjöt, En þegar gammrinn ferr í burtu, tekr Oddr til matar, en felr sik þess á milli.*<sup>38</sup>

Although Oddr is at first hesitant to eat any of the eagle's offerings, he eventually does so when the eagle returns to the nest with *soðit kjöt* (boiled flesh). Unlike in *Ketils saga*, where *mannakjöt* is revealed at the end of a long list of other meats, in this passage *mannahold* is listed casually among the other fish, birds, wild animals, and livestock from which Oddr may choose his meal. Like *mannakrof* and *mannakjöt*, the compound of *manna* (men) and *hold* (flesh) forms *mannahold*. It should be noted that Oddr does not eat this meat.<sup>39</sup> He avoids it, along with all other meats the eagle brings him, until he is brought unspecified *soðit kjöt* (boiled meat). Therefore, it cannot be said with any certainty that Oddr

---

<sup>37</sup> *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 234.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272. (The eagle carries to the nest more fish and birds and man flesh and all kinds of wild beast and livestock. In the end, it happens that it carries boiled meat, which Oddr eats as soon as the eagle goes away, but he hides himself in between.)

<sup>39</sup> Cleasby and Vigfússon, *An Icelandic Dictionary*, p. 278.

eats human flesh. Consequently, anthropophagy is of less importance to defining human identity in *Odds saga* than is the method by which any meat is cooked. Just like in Surtr's pits, the revelation of human flesh as meat is accompanied by a sense of horror—in similar, although not identical, syntactic construction, it is slowly revealed in a lexical field of meats—however, greater meaning accompanies the implication that Oddr eats boiled meat. When the saga author characterises Oddr as eating boiled meat, regardless of whether it is human flesh, in the same manner as trolls and other monsters, they blur the distinction between the human and the monstrous, presenting a reality in which humans act like monsters, and vice versa.

Oddr's preferred *soðit kjöt* belongs to Hildir. Moreover, this meat is Hildir's prized pantry item. The adjective *nýsoðnu* is a compound of the verb *soðna* (to boil) and *ný-* (new or fresh). This suffix suggests the common motif in *fornaldarsögur* of trolls boiling meat—usually human or horse flesh—in cauldrons. Old Norse literature frequently struggles to distinguish between trolls, giants, and ogres, lumping them all together under the pronouns *jotunn* or *tröll*, as Ármann Jakobsson has explored.<sup>40</sup> In this saga's reality, Hildir may as well be called troll or ogre along with any previous man-eaters encountered in these narratives. He is compared to the many trolls who boil human flesh in cauldrons, noted above. Hildir also cooks his meat in this way (that is, in a cauldron, and not by wrapping his meat in a cloth). The shared way in which they prefer their meat to be cooked indicates the identities of both the giant and the saga hero, both of whom eat boiled meat. Oddr eats this meat in the eagle's nest, as well as later, when he lives for a time as Hildir's guest.<sup>41</sup> During this time the two share a hybrid social identity, though whether this is human or monstrous remains indefinable. Just like *Ketils saga* fuses the human and the animal through careful lexical

---

<sup>40</sup> Jakobsson, 'Identifying the Ogre'.

<sup>41</sup> *Örvar-Odds saga*, p. 273.

construction, *Odds saga* merges the human and the monstrous by making them share a cooking pot.

In *Ketils saga* and *Odds saga*, the identities of the saga heroes and their adversaries are distinguished by the food they eat and how they cook it. Consequently, these sagas deconstruct the human, either to horrific or puzzling effect. They present a complex understanding of human identity within the cultural mindset that produced these texts. Unsettling in their conclusions, they explore the possibility that men and monsters are not easily distinguished and that something as slight as a method of cooking separates the two. Moreover, the deconstructed human in these sagas presents the question of whether, in the *fornaldarsögur*, the human should be understood on the same terms as the non-human.

**Works Cited**

- Adams, Carol J., *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1990)
- Arnold, Martin, “‘Hvat er troll nema þat?’: The Cultural History of the Troll”, in *The Shadow Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. by Tom Shippey (Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2005), pp. 111–39
- Barraclough, Eleanor Rosamund, *Beyond the Northlands: Viking Voyages and the Old Norse Sagas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- Cleasby, Richard, and Guðbrandr Vigfússon, eds, *An Icelandic Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957)
- Clunies Ross, Margaret, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Society*, II: *The Reception of Norse Myths in Medieval Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998)
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, ‘Monster Culture (Seven Theses)’, in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3–25
- DeAngelo, Jeremy, ‘The North and the Depiction of the Finnar in the Icelandic Sagas’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 82 (2010), 257–86
- Egilsdóttir, Ásdis, ‘Food and Cultural Identity in the fornaldarsögur’, in *Skemmtiligastar Lygisögur: Studies in Honour of Galina Glazyrina*, ed. by Tatiana N. Jackson and Elena A. Melnikova (Moscow: Dmitry Pozharskiy University, 2012), pp. 138–47
- Finsen, Vilhjálmur, ed., *Grágás: Islændernes lovbog i fristatens tid* (Copenhagen: Trykt i Brodrene berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852)
- Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda II: Annað Bindi*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976)

- Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda III: Annað Bindi*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976)
- Fornaldar Sögur Norðurlanda IV: Annað Bindi*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1976)
- Jakobsson, Ármann, 'Identifying the Ogre', in *Fornaldarsagaerne, myter og virkelighed: studier I de oldislandske fornaldarsögyr Norðurlanda*, ed. by Annette Lassen, Agneta Ney, and Ármann, Jakobsson (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2009), pp. 181–200
- Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás: The Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts*, ed. by Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006)
- Leslie, Helen F., 'Border Crossings: Landscape and the Other World in the Fornaldarsögur', *Scripta Islandica*, 60 (2009), 119–36
- Mitchell, Stephen, 'The Supernatural and Other Elements of the Fantastic in the *fornaldarsögur*', in *The Fantastic in Old Norse/Icelandic Literature: Sagas and the British Isles: The 13th International Saga Conference*, II, ed. by John, McKinnel, David Ashurst, and Donata Kick (Durham: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006), pp. 609–706
- Orning, Hans Jacob, 'The Magical Reality of the Late Middle Ages: Exploring the World of the *fornaldarsögur*', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 35 (2010), 3–20
- Steel, Karl, *How to Make a Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011)
- Tulinius, Torfi, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002)
- Zachrisson, Inger, 'The Sámi and their interaction with the Nordic Peoples', in *The Viking World*, ed. by Stefan Brink and Neil Price (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 32–39