



## A Study of How Descriptions of Physical Appearance Can Affect the Perception of Characters in the Sagas of Icelanders, With a Particular Focus on *Eyrbyggja saga*, *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* and *The Vinland Sagas*

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Written by Icelanders 'to present their own heritage, drawing on the only available sources: their elders', *Íslendingasögur* are creative interpretations of the past, a 'merging of the oral and the written'.<sup>1</sup> As the saga stories were 'told and retold...reshaped and changed' across the two-hundred-years from their events to their writing down, their historical accuracy is questionable. However as 'mixture[s] of fact and fiction' they are nonetheless important sources within which Gísli Sigurdsson notes 'we can...detect many literary features and authorial intent'.<sup>2</sup> One such feature is the descriptions of characters' physical appearances. As Jón Karl Helgason states, 'many sagas pay close attention to a character's physical appearance. An individual's looks are certainly part of his or her personality, and saga writers are skilled in exploiting this', therefore it is particularly interesting to consider why saga authors chose to describe characters' physical appearances in certain ways.<sup>3</sup> Critic Tarrin Wills similarly identifies a relationship between physical appearance and personality, stating that 'physical descriptions are often vehicles for expressing particular types of personality or character types'.<sup>4</sup> In light of such notions, this essay will examine how descriptions of physical appearance can affect the perception of characters in four *Íslendingasögur*: *Eyrbyggja saga* (*Eyrbyggja*), *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (*Laxardal*) and *The Vinland Sagas* (*The Saga of the Greenlanders* and *Eirik the Red's Saga*). This will be explored through two sections:

1. **Physical Appearances of Icelanders:** through close readings of *Eyrbyggja* and *Laxardal*, I will examine descriptions of the physical appearance of Icelanders, namely Kjartan Olafsson and Snorri Goði, to investigate whether there is a correlation between the physiognomic notion that outward appearance reflects inner character, and how physical appearance consequently functions as a literary device

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<sup>1</sup> Gísli Sigurdsson, 'Introduction' in *The Vinland Sagas* (London: Penguin 2008), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Sigurdsson, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, 'Continuity? The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times' in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Blackwell Publishing Ltd: Oxford, 2005), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> Tarrin Wills, 'Physiology and Behaviour in the Sagas' in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia*, 8 (2012), pp. 279-297, p. 279 <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/10.1484/J.VMS.1.103201>>.

to affect the reader's perceptions of the characters and the underlying meanings it potentially conveys.

2. **Physical Appearances of Non-Icelanders:** using ideas established in the first section and similar methodology, I will explore the complex ways that physical descriptions are used in cases of encountering another cultural group in *The Vinland Sagas*, and what the consequent perceptions of the characters can reveal about notions of ethnicity in the saga era as well as the time of writing.

This essay will use English translations of the Old Norse sagas except where particular words are of significance; here the Old Norse will be acknowledged as it is important to note that meanings may change across translation.

### **Physical Appearances of Icelanders**

The aforementioned notions of a relationship between outward appearance and inner character relate to the ancient and medieval science of physiognomy which proposed that 'dispositions follow bodily characteristics.'<sup>5</sup> Though as Wills states 'there is a consistency in the representation of physical appearance and behaviour in the sagas which derives from a physiognomic tradition', this tradition, she suggests, 'can be shown to be independent of classical physiognomy.'<sup>6</sup> Descriptions of physical appearance within the sagas, therefore, likely derive from 'actual observation of human physiology and behaviour.'<sup>7</sup> Consequently, such descriptions can provide insight into how Icelandic authors categorised and made sense of their world based on their own, perhaps unconscious, observations of people to form their own physiognomic traditions, as seen in Lars Lönnroth's identification of the emergence of a native descriptive technique which emphasised heroic and athletic virtues.<sup>8</sup> In light of these notions of physiognomy, I will examine the descriptions of Kjartan Olafsson and Snorri Goði, two Icelandic protagonists, to explore the relationship between outward appearance and inner character - for example, whether a desirable outward appearance reflects a good, heroic personality - and how their descriptions can affect a reader's perception of the characters.

Kjartan in *Laxardal* and *Eyrbyggja saga*'s Snorri are very similar protagonist figures: both could be perceived as the "heroes" of their respective sagas; both are didactic moral

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, 'Physiognomics' in *Minor Works*, trans. by W. S. Hett (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> Wills, p. 281.

<sup>7</sup> Wills, p. 281.

<sup>8</sup> Lars Lönnroth, 'Det litterära porträttet i latinsk historiografi och isländsk sagaskrivning — en komparativ studie', *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 27 (1965), pp. 68-117.

compass figures for the reader. Margaret Clunies Ross notes the ‘saga technique of introducing characters into a narrative with a brief epitome...usually includes some salient physical characteristics that provide a clue to the person’s likely behaviour and temperament’; following this, it is interesting to observe the differences in the physical appearances of the two men and how these relate to their ‘behaviour and temperament’.<sup>9</sup> Though both are described as ‘handsome’ - Kjartan as ‘friðast’ (beautiful), Snorri as ‘fríðr sýnum’ (fair of face) - ‘no fairer or more handsome man has ever been born in Iceland’ (*Laxardal*, p. 56) than Kjartan.<sup>10</sup> The author also describes him as ‘a big strong man ... No man cut a better figure...and people were always struck by his appearance when they saw him’ (*Laxardal*, p. 56). This first portrait of Kjartan, ‘the most detailed in the saga ... establishes him as the central hero’ and might lead one to assume that his perfect exterior reflects an equally perfect ‘behaviour and temperament’.<sup>11</sup> Robert Cook, however, suggests that Kjartan does not ‘measure up to this ideal picture’ and notes discrepancies between the “‘external” views’ which ‘amplify this impression of a man outstanding in every way’ – for example Gest’s observation of Kjartan and Bolli swimming (*Laxardal* p. 68) as well as his being ‘favourite’ of his father and King Olaf (*Laxardal*, p. 57, p. 92) – and the behaviour he actually displays.<sup>12</sup> Cook argues further that Kjartan ‘spends most of his life in undignified quarrelling brought on by himself’ such as his disagreement with Guðrún caused by his ‘thoughtlessness’ in deciding to travel abroad, and as Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir colludes, arguably ‘displays no heroism until his final death scene’.<sup>13</sup> However, it is Kjartan’s Christian acts, such as his being the first to observe Lent as well as his ‘sacrificial death’, which redeem his character and evidence him as ‘Christianity’s foremost champion’ within the saga.<sup>14</sup> Kristjánsdóttir’s interpretation of Kjartan as a Christlike figure is, in my opinion, supported by the author’s hyperbolic description of his physical appearance which presents him as far superior to any other Icelander that he can be perceived as more legend than man; in spite of his flaws, his sacrificial death culminates with his physical perfection to

<sup>9</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘The Old Norse cultural code: concepts and ideologies’ in *Prolonged Echoes* (Odense University Press: Odense, 1994), p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 56. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, trans., *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London: Penguin 1972), p. 44. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit V (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), pp. 76-77.

Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Eyrbyggja saga*, Íslenzka Fornrit IV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), p. 26.

All translations unless otherwise indicated are my own.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Cook, ‘Women and men in Laxdæla saga’, *Skáldskaparmál 2* (1992), pp. 34-59, p. 52.

Ross, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Cook, pp. 52-53.

<sup>13</sup> Cook, p. 53.

Bergljót S. Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Introduction’ in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. xxii.

<sup>14</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, p. xxii.

construe him as a paragon who cannot be emulated, similar to Christ himself, but rather held up as exemplar.<sup>15</sup>

This reading is supported by a comparison to Snorri; like Kjartan, Snorri is ‘the principal figure’ of his saga, an important character in Icelandic history and a ‘man of great power’ (*Eyrbyggja*, p. 45).<sup>16</sup> He too is flawed, as is exemplified by his killing of Arnkel who was ‘mourned by everyone’ (*Eyrbyggja*, p. 102), and he too is redeemed by his Christianity as he ‘more than anyone else persuaded the people...to embrace the new faith’ (*Eyrbyggja*, p. 128). Snorri is therefore, like Kjartan, an arguably ‘ambivalent figure’ who Pálsson and Edwards state ‘emerges from the tale as a distinct personality’, though ‘little about that personality is unambiguous’.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Kjartan, however, the description of Snorri’s appearance reflects the discrepancies of his character: although as aforementioned the author describes Snorri as ‘fríðr sýnum, réttleitr ok ljóslitaðr’ (fair of face, with regular features and a fair complexion), he is also ‘of medium height and rather slight build’ (*Eyrbyggja*, p. 44), very different to ‘big, strong’ Kjartan (*Laxardal*, p. 56). His stature is described again in the final chapter when Snorri’s descendent Gudny Bodvarsdóttir views his bones and notes that they ‘were those of a man of average height, not very tall’ (*Eyrbyggja*, p.165). Liliane Irlenbusch-Reynard’s observation that Gudny’s remark on Snorri’s ‘ordinary stature’ is ‘as if such a great personality necessarily had to be outstanding even physically’ supports Claudia Bornholdt’s notion that ‘the outward appearance of a hero...mattered to the medieval Scandinavian audience’ who ‘used the outward appearance as a reflection of inborn worth and nobility’.<sup>18</sup> As such, the author’s decision to present Snorri using the historical fact of his ‘average height’ construes him as more human than Kjartan whose physical appearance is described in a way which creates a positive “Othering” of him; he is set apart from all others by being positioned above them as an unattainable role model. Snorri, on the other hand, is less “Othered” due to his more average appearance which construes him as a more human exemplar for people to aspire to through their growth of character and embracing of Christianity. This analysis has shown the way in which physical appearance acts not only as a literary tool through which authors can convey their own notions of the characters, but also as a way in which a reader’s perception of characters is shaped by the meanings created by descriptions of their appearance. I will now explore the

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<sup>15</sup> Kristjánsdóttir, p. xxxv.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, ‘Introduction’ in *Eyrbyggja Saga* (London: Penguin 1972), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Pálsson and Edwards, pp. 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Liliane Irlenbusch-Reynard, ‘Snorri Goði and William Marshal’ in *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 13.1 (2006), pp. 52-69, p. 55 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03468750510014123>>.

Claudia Bornholdt, ‘“Everyone thought it very strange how the man had been shaped”: The hero and his physical traits in the *riddarasögur*’, *Arthuriana* 22.1 (2012), pp. 18-38, p. 20 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23238933>>.

complex ways in which physical descriptions can similarly reveal subtle ideas and notions of ethnicity in encounters with another cultural group in *Grænlandinga saga* and *Eiríks saga rauða*.

### Physical Appearances of Non-Icelanders

*The Vinland Sagas* 'tell us much about the world-view of the medieval Icelander' as Sverrir Jakobsson notes that medieval Icelanders 'lacked both the vocabulary and ideology to categorise the people of the world in terms of race'; people were simply known to exist who differed greatly from themselves in appearance.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore interesting to explore what descriptions of the physical appearances of the Vinland natives within *The Saga of the Greenlanders (Greenlanders)* and *Eirik the Red's Saga (Eirik's saga)* can reveal about medieval and Viking attitudes toward this non-Icelandic group, and how such descriptions can affect a reader's perception of them.

As aforementioned, the *Íslendingasögur* evidence a physiognomic tradition which relates strength and beauty with heroism and superiority. From *The Vinland Sagas*, one can surmise that a lack of the former connotes inferiority, as E. A. Williamsen notes that through characterizing the natives as different in terms of 'ugliness...the Norsemen emphasize the opposite in their own characters'.<sup>20</sup> In *Eiríks saga*, the Vinland natives are described as 'short in height with threatening features and tangled hair on their heads. Their eyes were large and their cheeks broad', a description which instantly "others" the Vinlanders.<sup>21</sup> Alongside the derogatory adjectives 'illiligr' (hideous, ill-looking) and 'illt' (evil), the description of 'tangled hair' is particularly notable as good hair was a feature of the Viking perception of beauty as evidenced by John of Wallingford's 12th century account of their combing their hair every day, archaeological finds of combs, and mentions of beautiful hair within the sagas themselves, as in *Laxardal* (p. 56) '[Kjartan's] hair was thick and as shiny as silk, and fell in waves'.<sup>22</sup> It is possible, therefore, that this feature may have "othered" the

<sup>19</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, "Black men and malignant-looking", *The Place of the Indigenous Peoples of North America in the Icelandic World View* in *Approaches to Vínland*, eds. A. Wawn and Þórunn Sigurðardóttir (Reykjavík: Sigurður Nordal Institute, 2001), p. 102.

Jakobsson, p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> E. A. Williamsen, 'Boundaries of Difference in the Vínland Sagas' in *Scandinavian Studies*, 77.4 (2005), pp. 451-478, p. 471

<<https://search.proquest.com/lion/docview/215675629/630B7061E5674224PQ/1?accountid=8018>>.

<sup>21</sup> Keneva Kunz, trans., *Eirik the Red's Saga* (London: Penguin 2008), p. 45. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

<sup>22</sup> Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Eiríks saga rauða*, Íslenska Fornrit IV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1935), p. 227.

R. Vaughan, 'The Chronicle Attributed to John of Wallingford', *Camden Third Series*, 90 (1958), pp. 1-74, p. 60 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge>>

natives further for Medieval readers aware of the connotations of unkempt hair, who would consequently perceive them as inferior. Critics also suggest that the term 'Skrælingar', present in both *The Vinland Sagas*, contributes to the natives' "otherness", as Jenny Jochens relates the term to the natives' physical appearance 'since it suggests wizened and dried-up features'.<sup>23</sup> Jochens further suggests that the 'strikingly different' natives 'generated revulsion in the Norse' preventing them from seeking sexual encounters with them.<sup>24</sup> This observation, I argue, is negated upon close reading of the descriptions of the natives' physical appearances which reveal more similarities between the two groups than Jochens acknowledges and presents the natives as "others" in a more positive way.

Firstly, in *Greenlanders* the author describes that 'one of the men in the natives' group was tall and handsome, and Karlsefni thought him likely to be their leader.'<sup>25</sup> Williamsen proposes that this evaluation suggests 'that most of the natives are not tall and handsome'; though this may be the case, this statement firstly contradicts Jochen's statement that 'in all likelihood, the sight of the aborigines appears to have generated revulsion in the Norse' as evidently the natives could be attractive. Secondly, Karlsefni's identification of the native as the group's leader suggests that the saga author, if not the Icelandic explorers themselves, applied their own ideas of physiognomy – specifically the aforementioned notion that physical beauty was indicative of heroism and leadership - to the natives. This allows the readers to be perceived as less inferior to the explorers, and evidences Sverrir Jakobsson's observation that the Norse explorers knowledge of 'the world around them, based upon experience and writings...served to create a conceptual framework within which the newly-discovered people could be situated'.<sup>26</sup> By applying their own ideas of the world to categorise the natives, it is evident a bridge is created between the two ethnic groups.

*Greenlanders* also recounts Guðriðr's encounter with a native woman who the author describes as 'rather short in stature, wearing a close-fitting tunic, with a shawl over her head and light red-brown hair. She was pale and had eyes so large that eyes of such size had never been seen in a human head' (*Greenlanders*, p. 17). The specificity that the saga author describes the woman with humanises her from the off; her 'rather short' stature

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[core/content/view/73C3DAB576D9D05AF8E4B98C388150B3/S204217100000339a.pdf/chronicle\\_attributed\\_to\\_john\\_of\\_wallingford.pdf](https://doi-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.300830)>.

<sup>23</sup> Einar, *Eiríks saga rauða*, p. 228.

Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Grœnlendinga saga*, Íslenzka Fornrit IV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1935), p. 263.

Jenny Jochens, 'Race and Ethnicity in the Old Norse World' in *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 30 (1999), pp. 79-104, p. 102 <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.nottingham.ac.uk/10.1484/J.VIATOR.2.300830>>.

<sup>24</sup> Jochens, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> Keneva Kunz, trans., *The Saga of the Greenlanders* (London: Penguin 2008), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Jakobsson, pp. 89-90.

makes her seem less intimidating, while her 'light red-brown hair' and 'pale' skin are features which one can perceive to be not to the fair appearance of the Icelanders themselves. Her 'large' eyes, described using hyperbole, do on the surface "other" the native woman however I propose that they could also be perceived as indicative of her curiosity, as evidenced by her asking Guðriðr 'What is your name?' (*Greenlanders*, p. 17). The author of *Eiríks saga* also describes 'wide eyes' as a feature of the natives (p. 45) where they are also mentioned in the context of the natives' curiosity as they are described as 'marvelling' at the Icelanders; these descriptions remind readers that to the natives, it is the Icelanders who are the "other" in the Vinlands.

The details within the descriptions of the Vinland natives' physical appearances, therefore, suggest a more positive "othering"; though the authors obviously convey that the natives undoubtedly did look different to the Icelandic explorers, readers can perceive similarities between characters in the two ethnic groups. As such, the descriptions arguably indicate that the sagas reveal that Icelanders, both in saga era as well as at the time of writing, had less prejudiced ideas of ethnicity than modern critics such as Andersen and Jochens acknowledge.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, descriptions of physical appearance within *Íslendingasögur* are a key literary tool which allows saga authors to convey more information about characters and types of people within the sagas which affects a readers perception of them. These descriptions create meanings which can be interpreted to provide insight into how Icelanders categorised and interpreted their world and the people within it.



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