

IMPAIRED GODS AND HOLY WOUNDS: DISABILITY IN THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH ATLANTIC

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The Pagan Lady of Peel Castle lived in a melting pot of cultures on the Isle of Man in the 10th century, surrounded by Norse pagans and Celtic Christians. She was one of the last vestiges of a dying religion which exalted the sexual power and wisdom of women in a world becoming more patriarchal in the religious and secular spheres by the day. The Pagan Lady was a powerful woman, possibly even a seeress. She and her possessions lay underground for a thousand years before being unearthed in the 1980s by archeologists. While many of her bones had disintegrated, one thing became clear: the Pagan Lady of Peel Castle had a physical impairment.

The Early Medieval Period in the European North Atlantic was home to many religious groups, including the Norse pagans¹ and the Anglo-Saxon Christians. These two groups come from vastly different cultures and their basic conceptions of the universe, including the end of time, are divergent. How these groups view and handle disability and

¹ Norse paganism is an umbrella term for the various religions and cults practiced by the Norse people prior to their conversion to Christianity. As it stretched from the Volga River in modern Ukraine to Greenland, it should be expected that there is a diversity of practices, thought, and philosophies. Unfortunately, nearly all sources for the Norse people were written by Icelanders after their conversion. Therefore, the regional thoughts of the Norse pagans on disability have been lost. For the purposes of this paper Norse paganism refers to Icelandic Norse paganism as recorded by their Christian descendants unless otherwise indicated, as with the Pagan Lady of Peel Castle.

impairment,² and how disabled or impaired persons within these cultures view themselves, differ greatly as informed by their eschatology. The aim of this paper is to delve into how the textual and oral traditions of Christianity and Norse paganism relate to and interact with lived experience using both religious and secular textual sources. An examination of impairment among the lay person, the spiritually elevated mortal, and the godly through sacred texts, moral philosophy, prose sagas, mythic narratives, and hagiography shows a different understanding of impairment in Anglo-Saxon Christianity and Norse paganism stemming from differing cosmological outlooks on the end of the universe. Christianity's emphasis on a medical model of disability, drawn from its theological perspectives on time and earthly bodies, is vastly different from the Norse pagan idea of "usefulness."

Disability studies within the broader umbrella of Medieval Studies is an emerging field. The first serious inquiry into the topic was published in 2006.³ As such, it is an overview of how impairment was viewed in the medieval world, particularly in the High Middle Ages, several hundred years after the focus of this paper. Therefore, I will only be using sections of this text which are based on sources prior to 1066. There is still a wealth of information in this text, but it does neglect to mention the "Dark Age" of the Early Medieval Period. In 2020, *The Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, was published.⁴ This was a compendium of secondary essays and primary sources related to disability in Western Europe, .was published.⁵ The text included both Christians and Norse pagans, but neglected to mention how fundamental differences in religious worldview may have impacted the views of disability within society. There are other isolated articles, but these are the two main sources for disability studies not related to blindness in the Medieval Period. Recently, the issue of Norse disability has been tackled by graduate students including in Katelin Anderson's Master's thesis, *Mediating the Other Through Language: Medieval Icelandic Sagas and Disability Discourse*,⁶ and Caitlin Scally's essay *An Examination of Physical Impairment in Norse Myth and Icelandic Saga*.⁷ Other sources used include Jessica Chase's *Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis: Medieval Care Networks in the Lives of Three Saints*,⁸ and Lois Bragg's *From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature*.⁹

² Impairment is the physical and neutral difference in a person from most others, such as a missing arm or blindness. Disability results from when a society does not accommodate for impairments, and the quality of life for impaired persons is lowered due to their impairment. In other words, impairment is natural while disability is a social construct. Based on Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100-1400*. (London: Routledge, 2006).

³ Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

⁴ Cameron Hunt McNabb, introduction to *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, (Punctum Books, 2020), 13–21.

⁵ Cameron Hunt McNabb, introduction to *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, (Punctum Books, 2020), 13–21.

⁶ Katelin E Anderson, Dissertation. *Mediating the Other through Language: Medieval Icelandic Sagas and the Construction of Disability Discourse* 2016.

<https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/25906/2/Katelin%20Anderson%20MA%20Thesis.pdf>

⁷ Caitlin Scally, "An Examination of Physical Impairment in Norse Myth and Icelandic Saga." *The (Not So) Dark Ages*. Accessed October 3, 2021.

<https://www.sites.google.com/view/darkpagespostgrad/library/an-examination-of-physical-impairment-in-no-rse-myth-and-icelandic-saga>

⁸ Jessica Chace, "Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis: Medieval Care Networks in the Lives of Three English Saints." *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 1–20. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10412573.2017.1284367>.

⁹ Lois Bragg, "From the Mute God to the Lesser God: Disability in Medieval Celtic and Old Norse Literature." *Disability & Society* 12, no. 2 (1997): 165–77.

The primary sources for impairment and possibly disability in Norse culture are the *Prose Edda*,¹⁰ *Poetic Edda* (especially the *Hávamál* and the *Völuspá*),¹¹ especially the *Hávamál* and the *Völuspá*, the *Grágás* law code,¹² and *Grettis Saga*.¹³ While the *Poetic Edda*, *Grágás*, and *Grettis Saga* are all clearly rooted in oral tradition, the impact of Christian scribes should not be dismissed. These were written down, or composed in the case of the *Prose Edda*, in the late 12th or early 13th centuries, long after the official conversion of Iceland the island in the year 999. This literate Christian and literate filter means that the source material has been changed from its original pagan oral tradition by people who believed in a very different cosmological and societal order. There are, therefore, unavoidable biases present within the texts that are not necessarily true to the belief systems of the Norse pagans. This means that the beliefs regarding impairment presented in the texts may not be accurate to the lives of those who lived during the Viking Age, and may be a later invention, whether or not the changes were intentional. It is not possible to determine precisely the extent to which Christianity influenced these writings, but they are nonetheless the best sources available for the thought-process of Norse pagans on impairment.

The primary sources for Christian disability include Bede's *The Prose Life of Cuthbert*,¹⁴ the Gospels,¹⁵ Ælfric of Eynsham's *Homilies*,¹⁶ and St. Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God against the Pagans*.¹⁷ These sources include holy texts, teachings by Church Fathers, sermons, and hagiography. These different kinds of sources means that what different echelons of society would have been exposed to are represented. Both the texts that learned men would have read, including *The City of God* and the Gospels themselves, and information that common people would have had access to regardless of their literacy, like *Homilies*, are examined. This allows for a better understanding of impairment in the Anglo-Saxon church, because it does not exclusively investigate the resources available to the highest level of society.

The Gods

“Why do you question me? Why do you test me?
I know all about it, Oðinn, where you hid your eye
In Mimir's famous well.”

-*Völuspá* 29.¹⁸

¹⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*. Translated by Jesse L Byock. New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2005.

¹¹ Carolyne Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹² Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans. *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás, the Codex Regius of Grágás with Material from Other Manuscripts* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 1980).

¹³ Jesse L. Byock, and Russell Gilbert Poole, trans. *Grettir's Saga*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Bede and Marit Ronen. “The Prose Life of Cuthbert (Ca. 721).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 190-205.

¹⁵ Will Eggers. “Selected Episodes on Healing and Disability from the Vulgate Bible- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (Ca. 382).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 113-37.

¹⁶ Ælfric of Eynsham and Brandon W Hawk. “Catholic Homilies 1.10 (Ca. 989-Ca. 992).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 147-56.

¹⁷ Augustine of Hippo and Leah Pope Parker. “The City of God against the Pagans (413-26).” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020), 157-61.

¹⁸ Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water.”

-John 19:34.¹⁹

The gods Oðinn, Tyr, and HöðrHöðr, and Tyr are prominent impaired figures within the Norse pantheon. Oðinn is known as the one-eyed god, as he exchanged one eye at the well of Mimir in order to gain wisdom. Specifically, Oðinn is attempting to gain enough foreknowledge in order to prevent the end of the world through any means necessary, including the loss of his eye. He is never “othered” within his community for this.²⁰ That is to say, within his community Oðinn is impaired rather than disabled. Oðinn does not seem to have any negative experiences because of his missing eye aside from the initial pain of losing it, even though he is a god of war and an impact on depth perception would be expected. This lacuna is likely not because he does not experience these visual issues—it is even said that every morning he looks to the horizon from Hlidskjalaf—but rather because Norse culture did not deem it worth mentioning. This loss of his eye is also a transactional sacrifice or a transaction as opposed to an accident or a punishment, which may affect how it was viewed both by his fellow gods and by mortals. Oðinn is trading a part of his body to heighten his knowledge. This is therefore a purposeful injury, and cannot be twisted to be a reflection of his skill in battle or his fortitude against illness or other danger. Oðinn draws his power from this sacrifice. His power is not only not lessened by disfigurement, but is actually increased. This would be an example of a holy wound, a common theme within Christianity, although not likely influenced by it. Holy wounds are inseparable from Oðinn, as he died a double death on Yggdrasil via strangulation and a spear wound in another bid to gain knowledge.²¹ It is known that this self-sacrifice is not a later Christian addition, because Ibn Fadlan observed a human sacrifice being killed by a double death through spear and strangulation in what would become Ukraine along the Volga River in a Norse settlement along the Volga River.²² This partial blinding, then, fits with Oðinn’s acceptance of injury in exchange for knowledge. These injuries are what give him the power to be the Norse god of wisdom. Impairment, then, in Oðinn’s case is a source of power, and is not a source of weakness. in any physical regard. HoweverAlthough, it should be mentioned that at Ragnarök, he is “blind-sided” by the giant’s attack in spite of millenia of preparation and information gathering in order to protect the world. While this battle is not a direct result of his lost eye, considering that the loss of the eye was made in part to prevent Ragnarök from coming, there is a poetic comparison to be made between the literal and figurative blindness of Oðinn.

Tyr lost his hand because the gods broke an oath with the great wolf Fenrir. Fenrir was suspicious of them trying to tie him up, so he demanded that Tyr put his hand in his

¹⁹ *New International Version*. Accessed October 3, 2021.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2021%3A12-13%2CMark%2011%3A15-18&version=NIV>.

²⁰ Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

²¹ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

²² Ahmad ibn Fadlan, and H.M. Smyser. “Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf.” In *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, edited by Jess B Bessinger and Robert P Creed, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1965), 92–119.

mouth as insurance. When the gods refused to untie him, he bit off Tyr's hand.²³ Very little is known about Tyr, as most stories involving him do not survive until today. This gap of information means that it is impossible to know whether this lost hand is an impairment or disability as it cannot be understood how it was received by Tyr's community. He was a widely-worshiped god, as evidenced by place-names in Scandinavia, especially Denmark, so there likely would have been stories about what happened after this episode that have been lost.²⁴ At Ragnarök, he is able to kill the Hel-hound Garmr in a Pyrrhic victory, as he also succumbs to the wounds wrought by the dog. Interestingly, he dies of is killed by blood loss when Garmr rips off his other arm. It appears that Tyr did not gain any power from this loss as Oðinn did, but it was still a show of his power. As a god of war, he was able to display his courage to his fellow gods. If he had said "no" to Fenrir, he would have lost their respect. To the Norse, honor was more important than life itself as honor was considered to be longer lasting than the body, as is said in the *Hávamál*, "cattle die, kinsmen die, but I know one thing which never dies: the reputation of a man".²⁵ The loss of his honor would have been infinitely worse for Tyr than the loss of his hand. This injury can be understood as a retention of power rather than a loss or gain. It should also be noted that Tyr is the god of oaths.²⁶ He was called upon at the Þing and to oversee agreements. That he is the one to be injured for a false oath on behalf of the gods is potent. It was also his right hand which was sacrificed, which is not only the sword hand—, important for a god of war—, but is also the hand used in sealing oaths. Like the loss of Oðinn's eye, there is a symbolism to this sacrifice. This crumbling of social conventions is seen elsewhere in the *Völuspá*, starting with the arrival of three giantesses to Asgard. The crumbling of social convention is ultimately what brings about the end of the world. The golden checkers, which represent order, are mentioned before the arrival of the giantesses and again after the end of the world when Baldr finds them again. Tyr, by attempting to avoid Ragnarök, brings it into existence.

There exists no story for why Höðr, the third god, lost his sight. Again, this might be due to lost stories and this explanation may have existed during the Viking Age. With the story that survives today, one can still analyze his position in society. It should be acknowledged that without knowing whether Höðr was born blind, if he gave up his sight, or if he was blinded the analysis will be incomplete. Höðr is a full member of society, as evidenced by his being near the game which ultimately led to the death of Baldr.²⁷ His inability to participate in the game could be considered a disability, but this does not seem to be a structural societal issue for him. He was participating in social events, and was on friendly enough terms with Loki to accept his help. Loki did take advantage of his impairment, which may in this case be called a disability because if he had sight he would not have been manipulated into murdering his brother. He was also prosecuted by the gods, meaning that he is not subject to different rules or infantilized due to his disability and is instead treated the same as the other gods. He is killed by his half brother Váli, who Oðinn begat on the giantess Rind for this purpose, as a full brother like Tyr would then have needed to be held accountable by the laws of revenge killing. On the other handflip side, Höðr was not given accommodations at court, considering that he could not see that Loki

²³ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

²⁴ Irina-Maria Manea, "Tyr." World History Encyclopedia. World History Encyclopedia, April 16, 2021. <https://www.worldhistory.org/Tyr/>.

²⁵ Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

²⁶ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Tyr." Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica, February 24, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tyr>.

²⁷ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

was tricking him and that therefore the blame truly laid with Loki. That he was still prosecuted as the instigator for the murder in spite of not knowing that Loki was abusing his trust means that Höðr is not only impaired, but also disabled.

Christians, like the Norse pagans, also worshiped a wounded god. Christ was fatally wounded on the Cross, and, according to both the Bible and St Augustine of Hippo, those wounds did not heal upon his resurrection according to both the Bible and St Augustine of Hippo.²⁸ These wounds, or impairments on his hands, feet, and side, are not a disability to Christ, but are even considered to be holy, empowering, and pertinent to the redemption of humanity.²⁹ The wounds of Christ are like the wounds of Oðinn, in that they increase his power and godliness. They are, like Oðinn's wounds, the results of a sacrifice. Both sacrificed parts of themselves for the betterment of humanity. Christ gave up his life for people, while the sacrifice of Oðinn was his eye, strangulation, and a side wound for knowledge in the hope of preventing the end of the world, which would benefit all inhabitants of the universe including the gods and humanity. While only Christ is successful in saving his followers, as nothing Oðinn does can prevent Ragnarök, both deities obtain holy wounds with the hope of saving the world, humans, or both.

There is, in both religions, a clear line delineating what is acceptable for the gods and what is acceptable for humans. The gods operate on social spheres completely different from this world in acceptable norms in terms of gender, social interaction, and ability. This double-standard is most clearly defined in Norse paganism, although the feminine qualities of Christ's wounds and his acts of destruction while on Earth such as flipping the tables in the synagogue should not be disregarded.³⁰ The gods exist outside of gender roles, for example. Oðinn practices *seiðr*, a feminine magic, or sorcery, later considered to be degrading for men. Loki transforms into a mare, becomes pregnant, and gives birth to Sleipnir.³¹ Þor wears a wedding dress to trick a giant into believing that he is Freyja.³² These incidents are in the context of the *Grágás*, which makes even cross-dressing a valid reason for a woman to file for divorce from her husband.³³ Clearly, the gods do not operate within the human societal binaries. This distinction means that evidence in Norse theology should not be taken as evidence of the treatment of the impaired within mortal society, although one can and likely does influence the other.

The People

“The lame man rides a horse
The handless man rides a herd
The deaf man fights and succeeds
To be blind is better than to be burnt:
A corpse is of no use to anyone.”

²⁸ Augustine and Parker, “The City of God against the Pagans,” edited by McNabb, 157-61.

²⁹ There are many accounts throughout the Middle Ages, although particularly in the High Middle Ages, of worship centered around these wounds. The devout would pray to each of the drops of blood that were alleged to have fallen, and to kiss images of the wounds. Vibeke Olson, “Penetrating the Void: Picturing the Wound in Christ's Side as a Performative Space.” In *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, edited by Larissa Tracey and Kelly DeVries, (Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 313–39.

³⁰ *New International Version*.

³¹ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Dennis et al., trans. *Laws of Early Iceland*.

“And as he was coming to him, the devil threw him down and tore him. And Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, and cured the boy, and restored him to his father.”

-Luke 9:42-43.³⁵

The *Grágás* shows how disability was viewed under the law. It is then a more reliable source than the Eddas for how humans with impairments were treated. It states that it is illegal for a person to not be attached to a household, which is defined as contributing to the function of the house. The punishment for not doing so was enslavement, fining, or becoming an outlaw.³⁶ However, this statute does not mean that impaired people were all subject to such punishments. It says that all people need to be useful in some way, but it does not define how. Hávamál 71, however, does, stating. It states that it does not matter if someone is impaired, so long as they are “of use.”³⁷ Norse society was, therefore, willing to accommodate impairment to a certain extent. It did not matter what one could not do, but rather what one could. This attitude is reflected in the theology, especially in the story of Höðr. It did not matter to the other gods that Höðr had no way of knowing that Loki had given him mistletoe to throw, but rather that he retained the ability to ultimately throw it. It can then be assumed that people within this society may have faced challenges like Höðr did, where people only cared what one can do, but not what one cannot do. Impaired people might have been unable to receive accommodations, which would have made them disabled.

A consequence of thinking of people in terms of their “usefulness” would certainly be the enslavement or outlawry of those who cannot be “of use” to their communities. While it is not defined what criterion is considered useful enough, the existence of this law implies that some people did not meet this measure. Those people would certainly have been considered disabled. Additionally, there is the issue of infant exposure. After the coming of Christianity, this practice was outlawed, which means that in pagan times it was still in use.³⁸ However, accounts say that both abled and impaired infants were exposed to the elements. Due to the nature of the fragility of infant bones, and the exposures not being done in burial grounds, it is not possible to archaeologically prove that impaired infants were exposed at a higher rate than abled infants.³⁹ If they were, that would be a case of ableism and disability within Norse pagan culture.

Onundar Trefotr in *Grettis Saga* is an impaired saga hero.⁴⁰ He was injured at war, and lost his leg. His epithet, Trefotr, literally means “tree-foot” or “wooden-leg.” While it may be tempting to say that this is a disparaging appellation, such descriptors are a common saga convention.⁴¹ People are often referred to by physical characteristics, like Eirik the Red or Harald Bluetooth. This is no more a pejorative description than any other reference to a character’s appearance. Onundr often lamented that he felt that people thought less of him

³⁴ Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

³⁵ *New International Version*.

³⁶ Dennis et al., trans. *Laws of Early Iceland*.

³⁷ Scally, “An Examination of Physical Impairment.”

³⁸ Bragg, “From the Mute God.”

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Byock and Poole, trans. *Grettir's Saga*.

⁴¹ Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

now, but this is refuted by other characters in the story who gave him compliments and attempted to make him feel better about his missing leg. In the end, he killed his enemy who had made negative comments about his leg because the enemy got his sword stuck in the prosthetic. Therefore, his impairment saved his life and caused the death of a man who disrespected Onundr on the basis of it.⁴² His worry about having lost honor seems to be Onundr's insecurities rather than the perception of him within the saga world, given that not only do other characters regularly defend him, but he is also still able to fight on the battlefield. In battle, his leg is even an advantage rather than a hindrance. In the writing of the saga, and the earlier skalds who told this story prior to it being written down, Onundr is clearly a well-respected and honored man. Onundr is impaired, not disabled. He does not face discrimination on the basis of his missing leg because he is still "useful" in the eyes of Norse society. It is said that "[h]e was the bravest and the most agile one-legged man ever in Iceland."⁴³

Katelin Anderson discusses Ivarr inn Bbeinlausí, who suffered from some sort of bone disease which made his bones very weak.⁴⁴ While it is implied in the surviving narrative that this impairment is a punishment for his father not respecting the desires of his mother, no disparaging comments are made against Ivarr. This is not the only instance of the punishment of the parents being transferred to their children. In *Hroffs Saga Kraka*, Bodvar Bjarki and his brothers Elk-Frodi and Thorir Hound's Foot are punished for their mother having accidentally cannibalized their father's bear form by being born part man and part beast.⁴⁵ Like Ivarr inn beinlausí, all judgment from society is cast on their parents rather than on them. Interestingly, this could be seen as a moral sin resulting in a physical punishment, a trend common within Christianity. However, society does not treat any of these characters like sinners or with any sort of disdain. While the lack of judgment could be due to the notorious nature of Icelandic sagas to use few descriptors, it describes Ivarr as handsome and wise, meaning that his impairment, while part of his epithet, is not his only quality. His weak bones mean that he is often carried by others, and that he cannot fight with an ax or sword. However, he has great knowledge of magic and is very good with a bow and arrow, making him "useful" according to Norse society. This use of magic is significant, considering that Oðinn, god of magic, is also physically impaired. It may not be that Ivar inn beinlausí is magic because of his impairment, but he does seem to use magic because of his impairment. In other words, the magic may not be inherent to impairment but there might be a greater likelihood that those with impairments turn to magic in order to contribute to society. Magic also sometimes has racial connotations as well. Characters like Queen Hvít, who is portrayed as an evil sorceress, are often said to be magic because of their racial identity as Sámi.⁴⁶ Magic can then be understood as a tool of those on the fringes of society; the impaired, women, and racial minorities.

Texts informed how Christians people viewed themselves as well. There are 31 instances of healing in the Gospels.⁴⁷ These mostly focus on the healing nature of the miracles, implying a medical model of disability. In other words, impairment was something to be fixed and not a diversity to be venerated. These episodes fall into two categories, either those who were impaired as a result of sin, or those who are born with an impairment. The

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Byock and Poole., trans. *Grettir's Saga*, 25.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Mediating the Other*.

⁴⁵ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hroff Kraki* (Penguin, 2005).

⁴⁶ Byock, *The Saga of King Hroff Kraki*

⁴⁷ Eggers, "Selected Episodes on Healing," edited by McNabb, 113-37.

historian Bede noted that the healing of the blind man in Mark 8:22-25 occurs as a metaphor for faith. So, as his soul begins to see the heavenly world, his earthly eyes begin to see as well.⁴⁸ The Bible also says that impairment is sometimes “the works of God... made manifest,” and is not always tied to sin, although it often is.⁴⁹ Those who are impaired from birth are understood to be part of God’s creation, but many of those who become impaired in life are understood to either be sinful or to be possessed by a devil. Therefore, medieval medicine is a holistic practice, with the health of the soul and a person’s connection to God directly correlated to their physical health. The body cannot be healthy if the soul is not healthy. Religious devotion was seen as a viable way to regain sight or use of the limbs, perhaps through pilgrimage to various shrines.⁵⁰ The information contained in the Bible was told to the faithful in the vernacular in England through sermons, as very few people would own the entire Bible. Some of these sermons survive, such as one from the 10th century by Ælfric of Eynsham. He, like Bede, relates the physical healing of blindness with the spiritual blindness suffered by non-believers. “All humankind was, as we said before, blind with lack of belief and error; but through Christ’s advent we were brought out of our errors,” he says.⁵¹ Impairment is then sometimes used as a metaphor for spiritual lacking or wrongness in the Christian world, especially impairment of the eyes. There is a clear link between blindness of the body and blindness of the soul. Ælfric says that in order to learn from the blind man in the Bible, people must not only “sit by the path” where Christ would walk, but also pray.⁵² Both things are necessary to see the holy light. The blind man in the story is not seen as a sinner being punished, but an example of the universal human condition for the congregation to emulate. His impairment does not prevent him from being viewed by society as a worthy example to follow.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote in *The City of God* in the fifth century about what happens to the resurrected body of the impaired. According to him, all people are made “abled” after Judgment Day. He says that the body is like clay, and the matter that made up a hand in life might make up the foot in death.⁵³ This substitution also applies to hair and fingernails, and presumably it is this excess material which will form limbs which did not exist in this world. The exception is the saints. They, while reforming from their bones scattered across myriad reliquaries, will retain their divine wounds, as will Christ.⁵⁴ The gap between impairment in earthly and heavenly realms is clearly delineated here. Impairment is holy, but only for those who are holy or become impaired through martyrdom, as the impairment then becomes a mark of sanctity and the extent of the saint’s devotion. Impairment is a medical condition that must be fixed for those who are not saints. The wounds of the holy are themselves spiritual objects worthy of veneration, but they are made so because of their connection to the divine. The divine are not made so because of their wounds, but rather the other way around, even though it is through their martyrdom that they become sanctified.

The Holy Mortals

⁴⁸ *ibid.* Eggers, “Selected Episodes on Healing,” edited by McNabb, 113-37.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Eynsham and Hawk, “Catholic Homilies,” edited by McNabb, 147-56.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ Augustine and Parker, “The City of God against the Pagans,” edited by McNabb, 157-61.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

“When she arrived one evening... about her neck she wore a string of glass beads and... She bore a staff with a knob at the top.”

-*Eirik the Red's Saga*.⁵⁵

“Were I not, for my sins, held bound by this infirmity: for I have long had this painful swelling in my knee, and no physician, with all his care, has yet been able to heal me”

-The Venerable Bede, *The Life of Saint Cuthbert*.⁵⁶

The Pagan Lady of Peel Castle on the Isle of Man is both similar to and different from the Norse pagan literary sources mentioned before. Primarily, she is a woman while the majority of these other examples are of men, and there are very few instances in literature of women with impairments. This could be due to there generally being far fewer women than men in general in sagas than men. Additionally, as seen above, many of these physical differences are also gained in battlewar, which is not a danger women were generally exposed to, so perhaps women were also more unlikely to become impaired.⁵⁷ Secondly, the Pagan Lady lived on the Isle of Man.⁵⁸ The rest of these figures are either Norse gods, or human as recorded through the eyes of Christian Icelanders. She lived in a mixed society of Catholics and Norse pagans in a Celtic nation, with the vestiges of Celtic their paganism still alive. Religion was also a political issue. The native Manx were Christians, but the invading Norsemen were pagans. Many Norsemen converted to Christianity, and some were likely already Christian, having arrived on the Isle while fleeing the Battle of Stamford Bridge in England. Regardless, Norse paganism was not an indigenous way of life, which and this fact may have impacted the Pagan Lady's life in a way that it would not have if she had lived in Scandinavia. However, there was at least some acculturation between the religions, as most of the graves in the Pagan Lady's cemetery did not contain grave goods.⁵⁹ While this does not necessarily prove that those graves contained Christians, it is very likely.

Based on the goods she was found with, The Pagan Lady was a very powerful woman, based on the goods she was found with. She was buried with dozens of glass beads, which were extremely valuable in Norse society as they were imported. As glass is not an organic material, it is difficult to place the beads' location of origin, but it is likely that many came from glassmaking centers in distant places, like Italy or the Islamic Caliphate. She likely did not travel the world herself, but instead received the beads as gifts, or as payment for her services. Also in her grave was what has often been misinterpreted as a mortar and pestle for a hallucinogen. However, analysis has revealed that there is no trace of organic matter within the stone. This is then likely a ritual object, perhaps to represent sexual intercourse.⁶⁰ The Pagan Lady was likely a *völva* 'seeress' or a *seiðkona* 'sorceress',

⁵⁵ Leifur Eiríksson, “Eirik the Red's Saga.” In *The Vinland Sagas*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, translated by Keneva Kunz, (New York, NY: Penguin Classics, 2008), 23–50.

⁵⁶ Bede and Ronen, “The Prose Life of Cuthbert,” edited by McNabb, 190–205.

⁵⁷ Brian Burfield, “The Mutilated, Lame and Blind.” *Medieval Warfare* 3, no. 4 (2013): 39–42.

⁵⁸ Leszek Gardela, and Carolyne Larrington, eds. *Viking Myths and Rituals on the Isle of Man* 1. Vol. 1. (Nottingham: Centre for the Study of the Viking Age University of Nottingham, 2014).

⁵⁹ David Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle, Peel, Isle of Man, 1982-88: Prehistoric, Viking, Medieval, and Later*. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*.

based on her iron rod. *Völur* were female shamans who achieved Dionysian ecstasy, or an out-of-body experience, through a combination of hallucinogens, repetitive chanting, and sex. This experience was a technique of seeing the future, and *völvurthey* made their living by making predictions for farmers, traveling from farm to farm.⁶¹ This is not a practice that is done alone, and they would recruit the women from the farms they visited to chant with them. They were considered to be important and powerful members of society, so much so that the *Völuspá*, or the *Seeress' Prophecy*, is spoken by a *völva* performing magic at the request of Oðinn himself.⁶² This Eddic poem shows that sometimes *völur* were considered to have more knowledge than even the god of wisdom and magic regarding the distant past and the far future. This magic is called *seiðr*, and it is widely considered to be a feminine magic. There are very few accounts of *seiðmenn* 'male wizards', and they did not seem to be respected in the position. It would have been considered emasculating, as part of the ceremony likely included sexual penetration.⁶³

Peel Castle was the center of power on the Isle of Man for centuries, and it may have been a show of honor for the Pagan Lady to be buried there. Her grave itself was a mostly intact lintel grave, with one stone collapsed.⁶⁴ This is typical of the cemetery, with some bodies directly inhumated in just a coffin, and others in lintel graves. The Pagan Lady owes her preservation to the style of her grave, as most directly inhumated bodies directly inhumated were reduced to nothing more than imprints. The part of her grave which collapsed over one of her legs suffered this fate, and those bones were unsalvageable.⁶⁵ Looking at her physical remains, it has been determined that she suffered from severely bowed legs, and would have experienced a lot of pain while walking. This difficulty walking was because of rickets, a disease very uncommon in the Norse world.⁶⁶ Rickets is caused by a deficiency of vitamin D, found in the sun and in fish.⁶⁷ While it is not unbelievable for a person to not get enough sunlight in the far north, it is curious that the Pagan Lady apparently did not eat a diet high in fish. Fish bones were found in huge quantities during the excavations, and why the Pagan Lady did not partake is a mystery, though. It could be that her station was high enough to allow her to indulge in richer meats, like beef or mutton, to the extent that she suffered a vitamin deficiency. Her bowed legs and brittle bones would not have affected her work as a *völva*, as they used High Chairs or raised platforms to perform their rites.⁶⁸ Chairs were an anomaly in the Norse world, as most households used long benches for both sitting during the day and sleeping at night.

Comparing the Pagan Lady's remains to the literature, several theories emerge. First, because she is a religious figure, her impairment can be compared to those of the gods. Like Oðinn, giving up something in this world may have allowed her supernatural powers. However, rickets is not a sacrifice as it is not done intentionally. While what can be seen by the archaeological record shows that her disability was in her legs, and supernatural powers are often associated with sight, it should be remembered that eyes are soft tissue, so any evidence of an issue with her eyes would not have survived to the modern day. Additionally, the accuracy of the translation between idealized literary reconstructions and actual

⁶¹ Eiriksson, "Eirik the Red's Saga."

⁶² Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

⁶³ Neil S. Price, "Seiðr." In *The Viking Way: Magic and Mind in Late Iron Age Scandinavia*, (Oxbow Books, 2019), 55–190.

⁶⁴ Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* Freke, *Excavations on St. Patrick's Isle*

⁶⁶ Barbara Holgate. *The Pagan Lady of Peel* St Patrick's Isle Archaeological Trust, 1987.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Eiriksson, "Eirik the Red's Saga."

historical practice may not have been perfect. Without speaking to her and hearing her thoughts on the matter, it cannot be concluded that her power comes from her impairment as it does for Óðinn, but this is not an unreasonable possibility. A more apt comparison might be to Ivarr inn beinlausi, who also suffered a disease of the bone and practiced magic. Additionally, as a human, Ivarr operated on the same sphere of reality as the Pagan Lady. Another comparison could be made with Queen Hvit. While Queen Hvit was not physically impaired, she was seen as a foreigner in a foreign land. The ethnicity of the Pagan Lady has not been proven, but that she was practicing a Norse tradition, rather than a Manx one, tradition places her outside her religious sphere, physically. While her power may not come from her bowed legs, her career as a *völva* would have also satisfied the cultural need for every person to have a “use” in society. Her power does not come from supernatural forces in an exchange for the use of her legs, but rather from society itself, which empowered her to practice magic. Practicing magic would have been a job she could have had the ability to do despite her impairment. It, like Ivarr’s, would have also not been the only notable trait about her. Her impairment was a part of her, but it was not all of her and this was clearly reflected in how she was treated by society. The Pagan Lady was clearly a well-respected and wealthy member of the elite in Manx Norse society.

Less than forty miles from the Isle of Man, early medieval England had its own complex views of disability. Saint Cuthbert, who lived at Lindisfarne in the seventh century, was an impaired saint. This is the same monastery that was raided in 793 AD and marked the beginning of the Viking Age, linking Cuthbert and the Norse from the beginning of their expansion out of Scandinavia. The culture which Saint Cuthbert grew up and lived his life in was informed by the Bible primarily, in addition to philosophical texts by Saint Augustine of Hippo.

Saint Cuthbert, seventh century, became impaired as a child due to an injury to his knee.⁶⁹ The Saint developed what was referred to as “gout.”⁷⁰ Gout is a disease that strikes suddenly, limiting mobility, and then recedes again for a time. He spent his early years studying around England, often traveling long distances. Based on images of the Saint, he used a mobility aid similar to a cane.⁷¹ He was therefore visibly impaired. The Bible, specifically Leviticus 21:16-23, prohibits those with disabilities from taking the priesthood.⁷² However, there was a doctrinal announcement in the fourth and fifth centuries called the *Apostolic Constitutions* which “canceled out” the prohibition in Leviticus.⁷³ This allowed Saint Cuthbert to enter into the clergy. His *Life*, as recorded by Bede in the early eighth century, investigates the causes Saint Cuthbert believed to be behind his impairment. He seems to vacillate between believing that sin is the cause of his injured leg—, “were I not, for my sins, held bound by this infirmity,”— and believing that “not only the wicked but the innocent are sometimes permitted by God to be afflicted in body.”⁷⁴ Contradictory ideas about impairment were then present in his mind, and which he believed at a given time might have been related to his personal relationship with himself. In general, he believed that sin was a cause of impairment, but not the only cause. This is evidenced by true believers with

⁶⁹ Chace, “Animal, Vegetable, Prosthesis.”

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Dominic Marnier. *St Cuthbert: His Life and Cult in Medieval Durham*. (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press Inc, 2000).

⁷² Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

⁷³ *ibid.* Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

⁷⁴ Bede and Ronen, “The Prose Life of Cuthbert,” edited by McNabb, 190-205.

impairments receiving miracle healing.⁷⁵ His *Life* also establishes a known care network, where the impaired are helped by those around them instead of being left on their own.⁷⁶ While the *Life* by Bede is a good source, it should be noted that Bede changed several of the episodes from the original anonymous version. An episode from the anonymous version allows a boy with an impairment to seek healing on his own, while the same episode in Bede's version has his caregiver seek the healing for the boy.⁷⁷ Bede's *Life* should then be treated with some caution, as it contains the biases of someone who is not impaired recording the history of those who are.

During his life and also in his death, Saint Cuthbert had the power to heal others, but not himself. His *Life* states that he was able to heal infectious diseases, chronic illnesses, and paralysis.⁷⁸ However, Saint Cuthbert's own leg pained him for his whole life. There are multiple episodes where the pain in his leg leaves him bedridden for days at a time. In one such episode, an angel on horseback comes to tell him how to make the swelling go down.⁷⁹ In another, he is struck by an infectious disease which left him nearly paralyzed.⁸⁰ When he stands using his cane, frustrated that the prayers of his fellow monks did not seem to work, some of the swelling in his thigh travelstraveled to his insides and remainsremained there.⁸¹ It is not clear whether this swelling is due to the gout or the infectious disease, but this episode does emphasize that he had a cane regularly available and used it even when not impacted by an infectious disease. In both of these cases, Saint Cuthbert is aided by an outside force and is unable to aid himself. Miracles then need a conduit—a miracle-worker—but thea conduit cannot turn the power on themselves.

Saint Cuthbert should also be discussed in terms of his rarity. There are very few impaired saints from the Christian Early Medieval and Late Classical Periods, out of the hundreds who lived. His holiness in spite of his impairment is not the norm. There were many impaired people in the Early Middle Ages, who were impaired from birth, or who were injured in warfare, or who suffered from a disease such as leprosy. The lack of impaired saints is not due to a lack of impaired people in society, but due to a society that does not elevate impairment. The sainthood of Cuthbert and the handful of other impaired saints from the Early Medieval Period like Hermann of Reichenau and Alban are exceptions, not the rule. While impairment was not intrinsically tied to sin, that likely would have been a stereotype impaired people would have had to enduredeal with, as can be seen in Saint Cuthbert's episodes of self-depreciation and internalized ableism wherein he blames himself for his impairment. The existence of internalized ableism necessitates the existence in this culture of disability, which is likely how Saint Cuthbert likely saw his own impairment as. This idea probably existed in the popular consciousness, possibly leading to differing treatment of the impaired.

While Saint Thomas Aquinas lived several centuries after Saint Cuthbert and Saint Augustine, his theories take into account the feelings of the impaired themselves. He says that souls must match the body in gender, impairment, and other features.⁸² Therefore, if what Saint Augustine theorizes about Heaven is true, then there will be impaired souls in

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Bede and Ronen, "The Prose Life of Cuthbert".

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

abled bodies and they would feel out of place. This change in body may give those who were impaired on Earth an identity crisis, as they may feel as though they are in the wrong body. While this is not part of the culture which Saint Cuthbert lived in, it may be worth mentioning because of how this idea was not yet part of popular consciousness. Saint Cuthbert would have had to think about the changes to his physical body in Heaven without the language or theory to conceptualize how he may feel about that emotionally. He certainly looked forward to the day, but he may have also felt a sense of loss at a part of his personal identity.

The End of Time

“Brother will fight brother and be his slayer,
Sister’s sons will violate the kinship-bond;
Hard it is in the world, whoredom abounds,
Axe-age, sword-age, shields are cleft asunder,
Wind-age, wolf-age, before the world plunges headlong;
No man will spare another.”

-Völuspá 44.⁸³

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, and to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

-Revelation 22:12-13.⁸⁴

It can be seen that there is a clear difference of outlook on impairment in these two religions. Both have impaired deities and holy figures, but how impairment is conceptualized and how the impaired are treated are different. To the Norse pagans, impairment was a normal variation in the human condition, either from birth or as a consequence of a violent lifestyle. There is no focus on miracles or cures otherwise, and the medical model does not seem to be utilized at all. There is no indication of attempting to fix the impaired, godly or mortal. The contrast with Christianity can be clearly seen in an episode from *Njáls Saga*, wherein a blind character is given sight by the Christian God for just long enough to kill his enemy.⁸⁵ The pagan gods did not and possibly could not do acts such as this. Christianity, on the other hand, places extreme importance on healing and miracles. Impairments are something to be fixed through faith in God, either in this life or the next.

Each religion has fundamentally different concepts of the body and of time. The Norse pagans did not believe in resurrection, but the temporary immortality of warriors in Valhöll and the return of Baldr after the events of Ragnarök. In Valhöll, warriors who died in combat spend their days locked in fighting and are resurrected each night for a feast.⁸⁶ However, at Ragnarök they will fight Loki’s army and cease to exist in any capacity. There is no eternity in this religion. While the world will rise again in a new cycle of creation, those

⁸³ Larrington, trans. *The Poetic Edda*.

⁸⁴ *New International Version*.

⁸⁵ Kolfinna Jónatansdóttir, “Njáls Saga (13th c.)” In *Medieval Disability Sourcebook*, edited by Cameron Hunt McNabb, (Punctum Books, 2020, 168–72).

⁸⁶ Sturluson. *The Prose Edda*.

who exist in this world will never see it. The afterlife for those who do not die in battle, Hel, is dark and cold. There is no better life after death, so this life should be lived well.

The Christian Apocalypse, however, is also salvation, accessible to all who repent their sins and live a holy life. This emphasis on eternal life and a new body shapes the way Christianity interacts with impairment. All earthly bodies are only temporary compared to an eternity in Heaven. Even though impairment is not seen as just a product of sin, but also part of God's creation, impaired bodies are considered impermanent and possibly insignificant in the face of eternity in a new body. After Revelation, impairment will no longer exist regardless of its ties to a person's identity. The impaired in Christendom are not treated the same as they are in the Norse world, with descriptions of the impaired seen dragging themselves or being carried towards shrines in hope of being cured, rather than attempting to focus on what they can still do. That impairment is also sometimes linked to sin likely fostered ill will towards the impaired from the rest of society.⁸⁷ Healing in this life and the next are closely tied, with both types of healing coming from divine power and is the main focus of any discussion of impaired people in the Christian Early Medieval Period. With very few exceptions—, consisting mainly of saints like Cuthbert or Hermann of Reichenau—, there are no stories of people with impairments who do anything but seek healing. This contrasts greatly with Norse gods, and heroes like Ivarr and Onundar, who were great warriors. It can be clearly seen that the lack of a medical model changes what was recorded and thought of the impaired in Norse society when compared to Christian society.

Through careful examination of deities, holy mortals, and lay people, it can be concluded that Norse paganism and Anglo-Saxon Christianity view disability and impairment through different lenses. Because of their contradictory concepts of eternity, the human body, and the end of time, Norse paganism views impairment through a lens of “usefulness” while Anglo-Saxon Christians use the medical model. The impermanence of the Christian earthly body and the guarantee of healing after Revelations leads to a focus on healing, while the lack of resurrection or a happy afterlife in general in paganism leads to a focus on this life rather than a non-existent next.

⁸⁷ Eggers, “Selected Episodes on Healing,” edited by McNabb, 113-37.

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