THE IMAGE OF SEÍÐR IN OLD ICELANDIC LITERATURE:
CONSISTENCY OR VARIATION?

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CONTENTS

Introduction (3)

I) Defining Seiðr (4)
   A) The Area Researched (4)
   B) The Origin of Seiðr (5)
   C) The Question of the Völva (6)
   D) The Case of Eiríks Saga Rauða (9)

II) Occurrences of Seiðr (11)
   A) The Circumstances of Seiðr (13)
   B) The Performance of Seiðr (14)
   C) The Instruments of Seiðr (15)
   D) The Sounds of Seiðr (17)

III) Effects of Seiðr (19)
   A) Beneficial Magic Vs Nefarious Magic? (19)
   B) Centrality or Periphery? (20)
   C) Public Views of Seiðr (22)
   D) Seiðr and Ergi (24)

Conclusion (26)

References (27)
Introduction

No other Norse magical practice has been the subject of as much research, and as much controversy than the enigmatic seiðr. Already the subject of particular attention by Snorri himself (Ynglinga saga 4, 7) (Heinskringla (1935). Ed. Guðni Jónsson. 13 – 19), seiðr became the subject of modern scholarly research in 1877 by monopolizing a non-negligible part of Johan Frizner’s Lapernes Hedenskab og Trolddomskunst sammenholdt med andre Folks, især Nordmændenes, Tro og Overtro. Since then, seiðr has steadily attracted more and more attention and the impressive monograph (Sejd) that Dag Strömbäck dedicated to this phenomenon helped usher a new wave in the study of magic within the field of Old Norse studies.

Considered by certain as some kind of shamanic tradition (Buchholz 1968), while other link it to the Vanir (Brøgger 1951) seiðr has been the subject of intense scholarly debate since the beginning of the last century and is nowadays researched more than ever, particularly by scholars in the field of folkloristic, (Dubois 1999) philology (Tolley 2009), or archaeology (Price 2002). However, the present study, while whole-heartedly acknowledging authors that have followed such methods, will look at the phenomenon of seiðr from a narrower and more focused perspective. Following the method of French scholar Francois-Xavier Dillman, we seek to clearly delimitate our field of study and our primary sources and will therefore focus on selected works of mediaeval Icelandic literature in order to delimitate and define seiðr.

While some researchers (Schøjdt 2001) have rightfully underlined the huge temporal gap separating the redaction of the Icelandic sagas with the events they are meant to describe and hereby negate their status as trustworthy sources regarding pre-Christian Scandinavia, we instead wish to avoid such debate altogether in order to focus on the actual information contained in the sagas. For the sake of the present study, it is of little importance if the accounts of seiðr found in such texts are pure literary motive or if they rightfully depict an actual pre-Christian magical practice. We are indeed more concerned about presenting these accounts in the clearest and most comprehensive way in order to answer the following question: Do the accounts found in mediaeval Icelandic literature permit us to talk about a consistent magical practice or phenomenon named seiðr during the Viking Age?
I) Defining Seiðr

A) The Area researched

In his authoritative monograph about magic in Old Norse sagas (Les Magiciens dans l’Islande Ancienne, 2006), Francois-Xavier Dillman chooses to focus his attention to three main body of sources, namely the Íslendingasögur, the Landnámbók and the Icelandic Þættu. The present study will adopt the same approach but broaden its corpus slightly. In addition to the Íslendingasögur which will constitute the bulk of our study, we will also take into consideration the sagas of the Norwegian Kings (Konungasögur) authored, among others, by Snorri Sturluson and the Eddas (Eddukvæði), both also used, (albeit in a limited fashion) as sources by Dillman. In addition to these sources, we will also take into consideration selected accounts taken from the legendary sagas (Fornaldarsögur). Those sagas, most often set in legendary Viking or pre-Viking times tend to be regarded as unreliable sources for the pre-Christian by some scholars (Clunies Ross 2010). That is why we will be limiting ourselves to the less fantasist accounts, those which have previously been the subject of established scholarly work. The present paper will also differ from Dillman’s approach in another manner: the French scholar indeed chose to only take into consideration magical acts performed in Iceland (with the exception of the Eirik saga rauða 4 account) stating that:

As well noted by Sigurður Nordal, we observe in several Icelandic Sagas a clear difference between the episodes allegedly taking place in the native island [Iceland] and the adventures situated somewhere else, these later ones being in general less realistic than the former (P 14, my translation)

The present study, while fully acknowledging Dillman’s (and Nordal’s) conclusions (Dillman 2006: 14), will nevertheless take into consideration every mention and description of seiðr practice in our sources, regardless of their geographical settings. While it is true that highly colorful (and fictional) accounts such as the Bósa saga ok Herrauðs would certainly taint a study concerned with magic as a whole, we do believe that the few mentions of seiðr found in continental settings do not appear to be overtly phantasmagorical. We will also use this broadened approach to compare accounts of seiðr based on their centrality and peripherality in Chapter 3 (B). After having selected a corpus of texts from which to research accounts of seiðr comes then the question of the terminology: which words and terms
should be considered as describing seiðr and seiðr-practitioner? Besides the obvious terms such as seið-maðr and seið-kona used to describe a seiðr practitioner and the numerous words stemming from seiðr (seið-skratti, seið-staftr, seið-berendr, seið-hjallr, seið-læt) we are met with an extensive terminology used to describe magic and magic-practitioners.

Following Price (2002: 65 - 66), we consider that most of these other terms are too general in their meaning to be safely exploited as seiðr and henceforth fall outside the borders of the present paper which deals with the seiðr both as a phenomena and a practice and not with Old Norse magical practice as a whole. However, one additional term, namely völva needs to be included as it will be explained further down in Chapter I (C).

B) The Origin of Seiðr

The oldest extant mentions of seiðr are two Skaldic poems allegedly composed in the tenth century: The Lausavisa of Vitgeir Seiðmaðr (Ed. Powell and Vigfusson 1883: Vol. I. 364) and Sigurðardrápa by Kormakr Ogmundarson (ibid. Vol. II: 33). While the first account refers to the seiðr practice of the Norwegian prince Rögnvaldr réttileini, the second one refers to Óðinn’s seduction of Rindr by ways of seiðr. The tale, found most notably in Saxo Grammaticus (Gesta Danorum, 3.4.1) already sets the practice of seiðr in mythological context. Indeed, accounts of the practice of seiðr among gods and heroes can also be found in the various poems compiled in the Poetic Edda. In them, we find three direct references to seiðr: Völuspá (22) (Edda 1927). Ed. Neckel: 6), Lokasenna (24) (ibid. 98), Hynðululjóð (33) (ibid. 289)) and five other references to völva figures (Völuspá (22) (ibid. 6), Hóamál (87) (ibid. 29), Baldrs Draumar (4) (ibid. 273), Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (37) (ibid. 132) and Hynðululjóð (33) (ibid. 289). Each of these accounts will be discussed later on in relation to saga accounts but in order to study the mythological origin of seiðr, the accounts found in Völuspá (22) and Hynðululjóð (33) will be taken up, together with passages from Snorri’s Ynglinga saga (Chapters 4 and 7) (ibid. 13 – 19). In the Eddaic poems, we are presented with two tales of the origin of seiðr: In Hynðululjóð (33): 289 we are told of the origin of different types of magic-practitioners and jötnar. Each of them is said to have been spawned by one mythological character. In this account, völur come from Viðólf and seiðberendr come from Svarthöfði, two obscure figures, potentially jötnar whose existence are unattested outside Hynðululjóð (Simek 2007: 305; 365). While the former term, völur (plural of völva) can be
found in many other accounts, both in prose and in verse, the latter is only attested there. This masculine substantive could be translated as “seiðr-carrier” (Price 2002: 123) and, according to Strömbäck (1935: pp 27-31) has connotations of extreme obscenity. This association between the practice of seiðr and perversity and social stigma can also be found in relation the origin of the practice both in Ynglinga saga (4, 7) (Ibid. 13 – 19) and in Völuspá (22) (ibid. 6). In the later account, seiðr is introduced to the world by the völva Heiðr which is said to be particularly popular with “illrar brúðar” (wicked bride(s)). In Ynglinga saga (4) (ibid. 13), it is the goddess Freyja who knows seiðr and who teaches it to the Æsir. The parallelism in these two tales had led some to assume that Freyja and Heiðr are essentially the same figure (Simek 2007: 123 - 124). In this later tale, we therefore see the practice of seiðr originating from the realm of the Vanir gods but it is interesting to notice that nowhere are there any accounts of Freyja actually practicing seiðr. Instead, we find direct references of another god, namely Óðinn, engaged in this practice. In Lokasenna (24) (Ibid. 98), Loki accuses Óðinn of having practiced seiðr in the manner of a völva, an activity that brought ergi to him. In Ynglinga saga (7) (Ibid. 19), Snorri tells likewise that seiðr was practiced by Óðinn and that it brought shame unto its male practitioners and went therefore on to be taught only to priestesses. Notwithstanding the Hynðluljóð account which sets male and female practitioners of seiðr apart, both prose and verse accounts of the origin of seiðr appear to agree with the idea of seiðr being a phenomena imported from outside through female practitioners that would later on pass the knowledge to other women (Völuspá 22) (ibid. 6) or have their practice emulated by males (Lokasenna 24) (ibid. 98). This is reason enough we think, to include accounts of Völva magical practice in the present paper and analyse their place in the selected corpus of sources.

C) The Question of the Völva

As we have seen, in at least one account (Völuspá 22) (ibid. 6), seiðr is said to originate from a völva and in several others (Lokasenna 24 (ibid. 98), Ynglinga saga 4 (ibid. 13)) we hear of female practitioners of the same craft. It therefore seems necessary to us to investigate the place and image of female seiðr practitioners.

First and foremost, one should point at the fact that, while there is a wealth of terms used to design female magic practitioners as a whole, we instead encounter much fewer
words used to describe those specifically associated with seiðr. Both in prose and in verse, only two words could be said to specifically refer to such women: Völva and seiðkona. While the first term is widespread and can be found numerous times within the mediaeval Icelandic corpus the second one is much seldom used. The word, which simply means “female practitioner of seiðr” is only attested in four occasions (Völsunga saga 7: (Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1950). 121), Ynglinga saga 16 – 17 (ibid. 32 – 35), Hrólfs saga kraka 3 (Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1950). 7) and Örvar-Odds saga 2 ((Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1954). 205) and in the latter two, (which both belong to the genre of legendary sagas), the female practitioner is also described as a völva. In Völsunga saga, Signy takes the form of a seiðr-kona in order to secretly meet her brother Sigmundr. This account is only one of two accounts that clearly associate seiðr-practitioners with shape-shifting (together with Hrólfs saga kraka 51 (ibid. 101 - 104)) and appears at odds with the accounts in Hrólfs saga kraka and Örvar-Odds saga where the seiðkonur/völva engage in prophecy. These two accounts would for their part confirm Price’s theory that “There seem to be little to distinguish between the völur [...] and another type of sorceress called seið-konur” (Price 2002: 112).

So while the term “seið-kona” is not of a very widespread use, “völva” appears numerous times, both in prose and in verse (seiðkona only appears in verse for its part). As we’ve previously seen, in poetic sources, völur appear to be practitioner of seiðr. This association lives on well into later prose sources: in Ynglinga saga (16 – 17) (ibid. 32 – 35) Snorri tells the tale of a völva/seiðkona named Huld, originating in the mysterious “Finnland” and using her seiðr in order to trigger the violent death of two kings. In Laxdæla saga (76) (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1934). 224), a völva grave containing a seiðstafr (seið-wand) is unearthed. In Friðþjófs saga hins frækna (4) (Ed. Guðni Jónsson (1950). 92), two women (described as fjölkunnigu konu – witch women) make use of a seiðhjallr in order to weave harmful magic. In Eiríks saga rauða (4) (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1935). 206 – 209), set in Greenland, a völva, summoned to a farm makes use of a hósæti (high seat) as a base to perform seiðr and prophesize about the settlement’s fate. This account, similar in nature to the ones in Hrólfs saga kraka and Örvar-Odds saga seem to paint the völva as a woman mostly engaged in soothsaying activities.

Other sources mentioning völva do not make the connection with seiðr obvious but stay in line with the idea of a sooth-saying woman. In the Eddic Poem Baldrs Draumar (4) (ibid. 273), Óðinn rides to the East in order to awaken a dead völva who will reveal to him the fate of his son. In Landnámabók (S 179) (Ed. Jakob Benediktsson (1968). 217) a völva
named Heiðr reveals (spáði) to prospective settlers that they are to establish themselves in Iceland. In Viga-Glúms saga (12) (Ed. Jónas Kristjánsson. 41), a woman named Oddbjörg, despite not being called a völva, gives prophecy to two young lads. However, we do find several other accounts or references to völur which do not refer to prophecy at all. In the heroic Eddic poem Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (37) (ibid. 132), Sinfjötli uses the word seemingly as an insulting analogy towards his adversary Guðmundr, in a way that is reminiscent of Loki’s insult towards Óðinn in Lokasenna (24) (ibid. 98). Yet another negative account of a völva can be found in Havamál (87) (ibid. 29) which is a warning against völva who divine well. The last account of a völva that is to be found in our corpus gives a somewhat different picture of this female figure: In Skáldskaparmál (26) (Edda (1935). Ed. Guðni Jónsson. 134 – 135), on his way back to his homestead, Þórr meets the völva Groá who uses magic to remove a stone shard from his head. This story constitutes the sole written account of a völva or seiðr-practitioner engaged in healing magic. Lastly, later in the same work (Skáldskaparmál 34) (ibid. 152), Snorri quotes a skaldic verse allegedly composed in the eleventh century by Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson. This obscure verse makes reference to “the völva of Gymir” (Gymis völva- Gymir used here as a kenning for Ægir) which has been identified by the Danish author Thøger Larsen (1926) as Ran, wife of Ægir. These short verses cannot unfortunately give us any substantial information except that the völur here appear as in Völuspá (22) (ibid. 6) to be mythological figures.

Taking into consideration these various sources, it would appear that the völva can take numerous roles and perform a great variety of magical deeds. In a non-negligible amount of our sources, the völva is painted as a soothsayer (Eiríks saga Rauða, 4 (ibid. 206 – 209) Landnámabók S 179 (ibid. 217)) while in others, she appears to use effective magic with the intent of harming or killing various opponents (Ynglinga saga 16-17 (ibid. 32 – 35), Friðþjófs saga hins frækna 4 (ibid. 92)). Being called a völva would also appear to have had negative connotation when applied to men (Lokasenna, Helgakviða Hundingsbana I). However, the negative aspects of the völva are actually quite marginal, being only expressly stated in three occasions (Hrólf’s saga kraka 51 (ibid. 101 – 104.), Ynglinga saga 13-14 (ibid. 28 – 31) and Friðþjófs saga hins frækna (ibid. 92)) we therefore do not agree with John McKinnell statement that “the völva seems to systematically appear as an opposition figure” (MacKinnell 2005: 100). This negative view of the völva can however be partly substantiated by the earlier Eddic poems (Hávamál, Lokasenna, Helgakviða Hundingsbana I) that appear to be, contrary to later prose sources, to paint a somewhat more negative picture of the
völva. All in all, would rather emphasize the fact that in virtually all of the accounts or references to völva, she appears to be an outsider figure. She either has no apparent or permanent place in the society she evolves in (Örvar-Odds saga, Eiríks saga Rauða) or is clearly associated with liminal and distant areas (like the grave in Baldrs Draumar and Laxdæla saga). Such a vision of the völva is very much in line with the idea of seiðr (and seiðr-practitioner) coming from outside the civilized society of men that we discovered in Chapter I (B).

D) The Case of Eiríks Saga Rauða

As we will see later in Chapter II (A), among the numerous references and description of seiðr-practitioner and seiðr séances, no other account gives a description so rich in details as Chapter Four of Eiríks saga Rauða (ibid. 206 – 209). In this chapter, set in Greenland in the beginning of the winter, a seiðr-practitioner going by the name of Þorbjörg littilvölva (little völva) is brought to a farm where she directs a seiðr-ritual destined to foretell the future of the estate and its inhabitants. The account found in the saga stands out in the corpus of seiðr-séances that we possess. Indeed, while we find many accounts of magic-practitioners engaged in seiðr, virtually none of them does describe any actual séance. For this reason, the account in Eiríks saga rauða has been invaluable for scholars of Old Norse magic and this short passage in Chapter 4 has been systematically used to prove and disprove various theories concerning seiðr (Gunnell 1995; 334 - 336).

However, the account in Eiríks saga rauða is far from taken at face value by certain scholars. In recent years, the account has most notably been dismissed by Tolley (2009: 487 – 507) as a pure piece of Christian propaganda containing virtually no traces of pre-Christian whatsoever. Given the fact that this account has been used for decades by a great number of respected scholars, it appears important to discuss the reliability of such an outstanding account before continuing further on in the analysis of actual occurrences of seiðr. The arguments of Tolley could be summed up in three points: 1: The account of the seiðr-séance is built within the frame of the tale of Guðríðr, a Christian woman who will count several bishops among her descendants and which is overall ripe with Christian symbolism, hereby making the whole seiðr-account a Christian tale with Guðríðr in its center. 2: the wealth of details presented in the account is a fabrication by the saga’s author who makes an intensive
use of Christian imagery to paint Þorbjörg as a wicked Heathen and anti-Christian figure who will act as a fabricated opposition figure for Guðríðr. 3: linguistic evidence shows that several of the obscure words used in the account (such as varðlokkur and náttúrur) could have a very different sense than previously thought and would corroborate the first two points. While Tolley’s work on seiðr and shamanistic elements in Norse magic and myth is much commendable as a whole, his views and arguments on this specific passage are not beyond criticism.

While it is indeed true that Guðríðr plays a central role in the whole Saga and that she is shown in a rather positive light throughout, Tolley does go too far in his attempt to find Christian references that would support his theory. He successively states that the beauty (“Kvað Guðríðr þá kvæðit svá fagrt ok vel” [Guðríðr spoke the chant so beautifully and well] translation by Tolley 2009: 141 volume II) of Guðríðr’s magic chant showcases the beauty of her Christian faith (Tolley 2009: 489); that the völva is a regal character, whose mission is to announce the coming of Christianity (in this context, Guðríðr’s bishop descendants) in the same way that the three Biblical Magi announced the venue of Jesus (Tolley 2009: 489); and that the winter settings of the account parallel the winter birth of the Christian savior (Tolley 2009: 491). While such explanations are possible, it appears to be very much built on rather tentative conjecture. The same problem occurs when Tolley explains Þorbjörg’s complex garb he does so by advancing the idea that her appearance is one of an “anti-bishop”: her hood would act as a miter, her staff as a croiser, etc... (Tolley 2009: 491 - 495). While it is indeed true that her costume has been dismissed as fantastic by some (Price 2002: 170), other, like Dillman, on the basis of the complexity of her dress, have argued the absolute opposite, namely that such a wealth of details could not have been spawned from the mind of the Saga writer alone (Dillman 2006: 293). Tolley’s last arguments, namely that the two obscure words that are náttúrur and varðlokkur support his previous points can be criticized as well. In his analysis of náttúrur (Tolley 2009: 498 - 501), Tolley advances the idea that the word should be rendered as “natural power, virtues” and those refer to Guðríðr’s. Stemming from this idea, he goes on by stating that it is in fact Guðríðr who is the source of the prophecy while Þorbjörg would only act as channel (Tolley 2009: 500). Such a statement is again, highly tentative especially as Tolley doesn’t provide any other sources than linguistic ones. His second argument, this time relative to varðlokkur appears more grounded and the author makes a sound use of his comparative methodology. However, towards the end of
this section Tolley seems to shoot himself in the foot so to speak in the sense that he mentions potential genuine sources for the account of Þorbjörg:

The likely Norwegian provenance of the varðlokkur is consistent with the probable non-Icelandic origin of the völva scene overall, as noted above (Norway is a much more feasible source of the folk tradition of such seeresses upon which the account is part based) (Tolley 2009: 506, emphasis mine)

Overall, while Tolley does make some interesting points, his discourse appears as a whole too tentative for us to actually dismiss the account in Eiríks saga rauða 4 as a pure Christian fabrication. We will instead use it, along with the other sources at our disposal, to attempt to define seiðr as a magical ritual.

II) Occurrences of Seiðr

As we saw, the numerous accounts in our possession regarding the practice of seiðr rarely describe the actual act of seiðr itself. However, one can find quite some information regarding the circumstances during which it occurred. In the following table, we have gathered information regarding each account in which there is either description or mention of a specific act of seiðr being performed. In this table is included any description of specific séances described as having used seiðr, seiðr-paraphernalia or originating from a seiðmadr/seiðkona/seiðskratti and völva. Only one exception had been made, namely the inclusion of Viga-Glums saga (12) which we believe to be intrinsically linked with völur account such as Örvar-Odds saga (2) and Hrólfs saga kraka (3). The two accounts found in Ynglinga saga 16 and 17 have been crammed together because the perpetrator of the seiðr is the same in both cases and these séances occur immediately one after the other. The same has been done for the two accounts found in Chapters 35 and 37 of Laxdæla saga.

In this table, we have tried to compile the most important information pertaining to the act of seiðr. Alongside the source of the actual séance, we have listed information regarding the time of the day when the seiðr was performed, the settings of the séance as well as its effects, paraphernalia and approximate number of participants. A “Ø” symbol was used when no information was expressly given and the gender symbols ♂ and ♀ refer to the gender of active seiðr practitioners. When more than one of such symbols is given, it means
that more than one participant of said gender was present. This table will be used in each of the following chapter and should help us obtain a clearer view of seiðr as a magic ritual.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eiríks saga rauða (4)</th>
<th>Night</th>
<th>Public (hall) Greenland</th>
<th>Prophecy</th>
<th>Hásaeti + Spells</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Night</td>
<td>Public (hall) Norway</td>
<td>Prophecy</td>
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<td>Örvar-Odds saga (19)</td>
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<td>Protection (swords)</td>
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<td>Public (hall) Denmark</td>
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<td>Seiðhjall</td>
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<td>Ø</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>Spells</td>
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<td>Private/Public Danemark</td>
<td>Metamorphosis</td>
<td>Seiðhjall</td>
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<td>Prophecy</td>
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<td>Friðþjófs saga hins frokna (5)</td>
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<td>Private Norway</td>
<td>Ø (Weather?)</td>
<td>Seiðhjall</td>
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<td>Drawing/ Curse/Murder</td>
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<td>Prophecy</td>
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<td>Healing</td>
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<td>Private Iceland</td>
<td>weather/drawing/murder</td>
<td>Seiðhjall</td>
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<td>Ø</td>
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<td>Private Iceland</td>
<td>Curse/ Repulsion</td>
<td>(seið)hjall</td>
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A) The Circumstances of Seiðr

As we see in our table, the performance of the seiðr ritual occurs in a great variety of circumstances. Most of the time, we are not given any information on the daily or nightly execution of seiðr. On two occasions we see the ritual performed during day time (Hrólfs saga kraka 51 (ibid. 101 – 104) and Laxdæla saga 35 (ibid. 99)) while the nightly occurrence of seiðr slightly predominate with three attested occurrences (Eiríks saga rauða 4 (ibid. 206 – 209), Órvar-Odds saga 2 (ibid. 205) and Laxdæla saga 37 (ibid. 105 – 106)). Two accounts are problematic: in Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar (63) (ibid. 312) the seiðr ritual appears to have been performed at night but its effects are seemingly only seen during the next morning. In Vatnsdæla saga (10) (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1939). 28 – 29) the séance happens during a feast (veizlunnar) which would most likely take place at evening or night time despite the fact that no temporal indicators are given during the passage. It is also interesting to notice that only one act of nefarious magic (namely the one found in Laxdæla saga 37 (ibid. 105 – 107)) is explicitly set in night-time. As has demonstrated Francois-Xavier Dillman, taken as a whole, many more magical acts are described as taking place during the day than the night (2006: 105-107).

When it comes to the reasons for performing seiðr, we are on the other hand met with one overwhelming trend: acts of seiðr are almost never performed for the direct benefit of the spell-caster. In the huge majority of accounts, the seiðr-practitioner is drawn to the story-line by another more prominent character and is either paid (Hrólfs saga kraka 3 (ibid. 7), Gísla Saga Surssonar 18 (Ed. Björn K. Pórólfssson and Guðni Jónsson (1938). 56 – 57)) or offered hospitality (Eiríks saga rauða 4 (ibid. 206 – 209), Viga-Glúms Saga 12 (ibid. 41)). Unsurprisingly enough, most of the accounts of seiðr performed for the benefit of the spellcaster’s interest appear to be acts of nefarious or battle-magic: In Laxdæla saga (35) (ibid. 99) we see Kotkell’s family of seiðmenning casting spells in order to murder their enemies, in Hrólfs saga kraka, we see the princess Skuld using some unspecified seiðr in order to overcome her brother. In Chapter 51 (ibid. 101 – 104), she appears to turn herself in a boar and wreak havoc within the ranks of Hrólfur. In a similar fashion, Óðinn begets Rindr for his benefit alone in Sigurðardrápa (3) (ibid. Vol II. 33), an action which parallels Þorveig’s in Kormáks saga (6) (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1939). 223) who makes use of seiðr in order to make Kórmakr turn away from his marital engagement. However, other cases of nefarious (and sometimes deadly) seiðr-magic were commissioned rather than being the initiative of
the practitioner himself (*Ynglinga saga* 16 – 17 (*ibid.* 32 – 35)). It would appear, from the sources available to us, that *seiðr* could be both used for beneficiary purposes and nefarious ones. It could be performed at night as well as in day-time but apparently such a factor did not play an important factor in the performance of the ritual. Most often the practitioner would act in the name of a commissioner and might even get payment for his service but most often would not. In many cases, he would instead receive hospitality like in the famed account of *Eiríks saga rauða* (4) (*ibid.* 206 - 209).

**B) The performance of *Seiðr***

It is quite peculiar that, if among the twenty-four accounts of *seiðr* complied in the present study, all but two describe, often in sheer detail the results of the performance, none but two give any descriptions of the performance in itself. These accounts, namely *Eiríks saga rauða* (4) (*ibid.* 206 – 209) and *Órvar-Odds saga* (2) (*ibid.* 205) are indeed the only ones giving some form of explanations as to how the *seiðr*-practitioner (namely here *völur*) proceeds in order to perform the *seiðr* ritual.

Of the two accounts, the one found in *Eiríks saga rauða* is by far the most detailed while the one in *Órvar-Odds saga* is much more succinct. Both agree in a certain number of points that we will hereby summarize: 1: The *seiðr*-practitioner is a woman who is said to be a *völva*. 2: The *völva* arrives at a homestead during the day but waits until the next evening to engage in the *seiðr*-ritual. 3: several people besides the *völva* are involved in the séance, seemingly as aides. 4: one or several members of the *völva*’s aides engage in chanting. 5: Some time later the *völva* answers specific questions of the members of the homestead.

Despite the fact that the two accounts differ in several key points (in *Eiríks saga rauða* Þorbjörg travels alone while in *Órvar-Odds saga* Heiðr travels with her full retinue of 15 young men and 15 young females for example), the similitudes of the two accounts have led some to believe that *Órvar-Odds saga*, being of a later confection than *Eiríks saga rauða* (Strömbäck 1935: 97) might just be borrowing a literary motif from its older counterpart. This argument, advanced by Tolley (2009: 514) could indeed be taken into consideration, but given that Tolley’s own dismissal of the account is made in barely two hundred words and utterly fail to actually undermine the credibility of the *Órvar-Odds saga* account, we shan’t consider this theory in the present paper.
In any cases, while both accounts pertain solely to the type of divinatory-seiðr which was the prerogative of female practitioners (the idea of the homestead visitation being indeed only found in accounts centers on the practice of sooth-saying woman, see most importantly McKinnell 2005: 100-108 for a swift analysis of the motive of the völva’s prophecies), one element found in these sagas appear in a non-negligible number of seiðr account, namely the idea that seiðr-practitioner practice in group. While the majority of seiðr-accounts present in our study involve only one spell-caster (Gísla saga Súrssonar, Ynglinga saga for example) one can find various accounts of bands of seiðmenn either performing seiðr or traveling together. In most cases, the band of seiðr-practitioners are made of members of one gender only (Friðþjófs saga frækna 4 (ibid. 92) where two fjöllkuningu konur act in concert or Örvar-Odds saga (19) (ibid. 281) where a group of unidentified male Bjarmar perform seiðr on Ögmundr), we meet a remarkable exception to this rule in the Chapters 35 and 37 of the Laxdæla saga where we are told of the Hebridean magician Kotkell, patriarch of a family completed by his wife and his two sons who are, just like himself, practising seiðmenn.

As a conclusion, while the accounts in Eiríks saga rauða and Örvar-Odds saga appear to pertain to one particular type of seiðr séance, namely the sooth-saying of the female völva, several elements found in such accounts, most importantly concerning the paraphernalia and the sounds of the seiðr are corroborated in other accounts.

C) The Instruments of Seiðr

Alongside the idea of seiðr being practiced in a group, another feature, this time material regularly comes back in the seiðr accounts at our disposal: namely the use by seiðr-practitioners of seiðhjallr. These items, which are generally rendered in English as “seið-platform” or “seið-scaffold” should most likely be seen as the same as Eiríks saga Rauða’s hósæti (Price 2002: 163) on top of which Þorbjörg seats herself in order to conduct the seiðr séance.

Seiðhjallr are remarkable in the sense that their uses are attested for a wide range of different seiðr-rituals. They can be used both for harmless prophecy (Eiríks saga rauða 4 (ibid. 206 – 209), Hrólfs saga kraka 3 (ibid. 7)) as well as in the heat of the battle (Hrólfs saga kraka 51) (ibid. 101 – 104). However, it is important to note that, among the six accounts of
the use of a seiðhjallr that we possess, the platform is used in order to weave nefarious magic on three occasions, while it is used only two times for means of prophecy. The sixth account, found in a context of a bloody military fight could also be linked to the three nefarious ones. If the reason why the two fjöllkuningu konur found in Friðþjófs saga hins frækna (4) (ibid. 92) climb a seiðhjallr is not given (they indeed very quickly fall from it and break both of their backs), the longer version of the same text has the two women, here clearly described as seiðkonur, create bad weather in an attempt to harm Friðþjóf. This idea of altering the weather for the worst with the help of a seiðhjallr can also be found in Laxdæla saga 35 (ibid. 99) where Kotkell and his family of seiðmen are described as creating a storm that claim the lives of no less than twelve people. Their murderous seiðr performance in Chapter 37 (ibid. 105 – 107) could also be linked with the general idea of performing seiðr in an elevated place insofar as they position themselves on the top of their victim’s roof when starting their spell.

No other material item appears to have played such an important role in the written accounts of seið as the seiðhjallr. The dress of the seiðr-practitioner doesn’t appear to have wielded any particular power and there is no academic consensus on the subject. While Dillman the detailed account of the costume in Eiríks saga rauða (4) (ibid. 206 – 209) to wield some kind of significance (Dillman 2006: 304), other authors have criticized this specific account, the only one that we possess that describes in detail the costume of a seiðr-practitioner as fantastic. We have seen previously what the opinion of Tolley on the subject was (Chapter I (D)); he is rejoined in his critic of Þorbjörg’s garb by Price who sees it as “suitable for a story-book magician” (Price 2002: 170). Other descriptions of the appearance or clothing of a seiðr-practitioner are practically non-existent but we should at the very least mention Chapter 2 of Órvar-Odds saga which makes reference to a specific, ([Takið föt min," sagdi völvan”]: “Take my clothes said the völva”, translation by myself ibid. 207) yet non-described, article of clothing whose potential use in seiðr-ritual is unfortunately impossible to ascertain.

One last item that is attested in at least two Saga accounts is the seiðstafr or seið-staff. It is carried by Þorbjörg in Eiríks saga rauða (4) (ibid. 206 – 209) and found in the grave of a völva in Laxdæla saga (76) (ibid. 224). While in Eiríks saga rauða the staff plays no role whatsoever, the people unearthing the grave of the völva specifically identify her as a völva because of her staff. Another, more linguistic connection links seiðstafr and völur: Völva means indeed “Staff bearer” (Price 2002: 177).
It seems that, besides the *seiðhjallr*, no other magical paraphernalia were widely used by *seiðr*-practitioners. On the other hand, another feature of *seiðr* seems to have played a more important role, namely sound.

**D) The Sounds of *Seiðr***

Authors like Terry Gunnell have pointed out the fact that some of the most detailed accounts of *seiðr* prominently feature the act of chanting (Gunnell 1995: 325 – 336). In both accounts of *Laxdæla saga* (Chapters 35 and 37) (*ibid.* 99. 105 – 106), chanting constitutes the core of the nefarious spells weaved by Kotkell's family. In Chapter 35: Þau kváðu þar fræði sín en það voru galdrar (“they sang their fierce lore there, in the form of charms”). And in Chapter 37:

En er seiðlætin komu upp þá þóttust þeir eigi skilja er inni voru hverju gegna mundi.
En fógur var sú kveðandi að heyra

But when the *seiðr* antics began, those inside were at loss to understand what it could be for; but beautiful was the singing to hear” both translations by Tolley, 2009

One important factor of the oral component of negative *seiðr* seems to have been the *galdr*, found in the *Laxdæla saga* account of Chapter 35 as well as in several other ones like *Hrólfs saga kraka* 48 (þetta váru mest galdrar ok gerningar, [“It was mostly done with spells and sorcery”]). *Galdh* was not only limited to nefarious magic: in *Skáldskaparmál* (26) (*ibid.* 134 – 135), the *völva* Groá makes use of *galdr* in order to heal Þór’s injury. Two other accounts can be used to underline the link between *seiðr* and *galdr*: in *Örvar- Odds saga* 19, the Bjarmians who render Ógmundr invincible by means of *seiðr* (*ibid.* 281) first give birth to magically by means of *galdr*. In *Ynglinga saga* Chapters 4 and 7 (*ibid.* 13. 17), Óðinn is described as mastering *galdr*, in the latter of these two chapters, and the description of Óðinn’s mastery over *galdr* directly precedes the description of his *seiðr* abilities. The association of the only Æsir making use of *seiðr* with *galdr* can also be found in the earlier *Baldrs Draumar* (4) (*ibid.* 273) as well.

*Galdh* appears thus as a magical “technique” (Price 2002: 65) used by *seiðr* practitioners in certain situations. Note that *galdr* never appears in accounts of prophetic *seiðr* while it is both used for healing (*Skáldskaparmál*) and killing (*Laxdæla saga*). It would
therefore seem that *galdr* is solely used as a component of effective magic. Galdr appear to have stemmed from the verb gala, meaning “crying, screaming, chanting” and would most likely have been some kind of a magic chant, as Dillman puts it (2006: 119). The use of *galdr* is otherwise by no mean a monopoly of seiðr-practitioners: In *Grettis saga* (79) (Ed. Guðni Jónsson (19). 249 – 250) we witness the casting of a *galdr* spell which, directed at Grettir, ultimately causes his downfall. Note that even in non-seiðr accounts of *galdr*-magic, the spell cast still always falls in the category of effective magic (with a clear tendency for nefarious such magic such as in *Grettis Saga* example discussed above).

Another type of magic chant that is found in association with seiðr is the much talked-about *varðlokkur*. The word only appears in *Eiríks saga rauða* 4 (*ibid.* 208). This complex compound word has attracted lots of attention in recent years and there doesn’t seem to be any actual academic consensus on what it might be or what the word might even mean. Dillman duly points at the discrepancy in the manuscripts of *Eiríks saga rauða* among which both *varðlokkur* and *varðlokur* appear. According to him, *varð* is to be linked with the idea of the shamanic free soul while the second part of the word could either have the meaning of “locking” (with one “k”) or “attracting (with two “k”) (Dillman 2006: 295 – 296). Tolley also links the concept of *varð* with shamanic elements, this time with the Finnic concept of supernatural innate power, the *Luonto*. He also points out the similarities between *varð* and *vörð* which is found in the thirteenth stanza of the Eddic poem *Grimnismál* in reference to Heimdall. This *vörð* is most often translated as “guardian” and might as well be linked with the idea of a supernatural force/spirit, especially as in the *Eiríks saga rauða varðlokkur* account clearly act as a mean to attract náttúrur, whose presence is necessary to the fulfillment of the séance (Tolley: 2009; 502 - 506). Price, basing himself on the *Eiríks saga rauða* and the *Laxdæla saga* account comes to the conclusion that the former’s *varðlokkur* “may well be the same as the seið-læti” that are found in the latter (Price 2002: 207).

All in all, the use of vocal components as a base for a non-negligible portion of extant seiðr-account cannot be doubted: Some form of chanting technique was used both in accounts of nefarious seiðr and more harmless soothsaying, whose overall characteristics we will discuss in the next chapter.
III) Effects of *Seiðr*

A) Beneficial Magic versus Nefarious magic?

We have previously encountered numerous references to, and even more importantly, accounts of actual *seiðr* séances and seen that those happened were conducted in many different ways. We have also seen that, while the performance of *seiðr* is only very rarely described, virtually all accounts of *seiðr* in the present corpus clearly state the results of the *seiðr* ritual. At first glance, it would be tempting to see a clear fault line between “white” and “black” magic in the present accounts of *seiðr* but we shall restrain from such an overly simplistic view just yet and start by reviewing the information found in these sources. Among the twenty-four accounts of *seiðr*-séance found in our corpus we find the following eleven cases (sometimes overlapping) of magical effects triggered by *seiðr*:

- 5 cases of prophecy (when information about the future is given)
- 4 cases of curse (when the victim’s mind or luck is diminished)
- 3 cases of murder (when the spell results in the death of the victim)
- 2/3 cases of weather manipulation (when the spell causes a storm)
- 2 cases of protection (when the subject is made impervious to blades)
- 2 cases of drawing (when the victim is coerced into travelling somewhere)
- 2 cases of repulsion (when the victim is coerced to flee a place or person)
- 1 case of metamorphosis (when the spell-caster changes shape)
- 1 case of transfer (when wisdom is transferred between individuals)
- 1 case of healing (when the *seiðr*-practitioner heals a subject)
- 1 case of fertility (when *seiðr* is used to provide food)
- 1 case of manipulation (when the victim is forced to accept sexual advances of the spell-caster)
If we were now to make the case for a division between beneficial and nefarious magic we would end up with beneficial seiðr being used in nine accounts (Prophecy, with the addition of fertility and healing) against ten accounts of nefarious seiðr (Curse, with the addition of murder, weather, drawing/repulsion and manipulation) with metamorphosis and transfer left aside as neutral seiðr. Such a way of drawing a line between beneficial and nefarious is of course bound to be arbitrary and oversimplistic but it can, we hope, help underline the quite obvious fact that seiðr appears to result both in tragedy (when used to bewitch as in Egils saga or kill like in Ynglinga saga) and in fortune (when foreseeing an end to a famine like in Eiríks saga rauða or when it is used to gain supernatural protection against blades as in Brennu-Njáls saga (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (1954). 80). Such ambivalent views of seiðr appear to be as old as seiðr itself: in Völuspá (22) (ibid. 6), Heiðr, the female figure from which seiðr originates is described as angan illrar brúðar ("always favorite of the wicked maidens"). This dismissal of seiðr doesn’t deter Óðinn from seeking counsel among dead völur (Baldrs Draumar (4) (ibid. 273) or even to engage in the practice himself (Lokasenna 24) (ibid. 98). It is also interesting to see that while prophecy is a purely feminine craft, effective and nefarious magic appear to available to both male and female practitioners.

In any cases, seiðr appears to be painted as a dynamic force, a phenomenon that sets forces in motion. In some cases we see a performance of seiðr kick-starting the glorious adventures of a young, unsuspicious hero (Örvar-Odds saga 2 (ibid. 105), Viga-Glúms saga 12 (ibid. 41)) while in other cases, a certain seiðr-practitioner or the effect of one of spell will create disruption in the otherwise peaceful life of a community or a hero (Kormáks saga 6 (ibid. 213), Laxdæla saga 35 and 37 (ibid. 105 – 106)). In order to understand the reasons behind the potency of seiðr as an agent of change, we need to analyze more in detail the place of seiðr and seiðr-practitioner in the world of men.

B) Centrality or Periphery?

When analyzing the various accounts and references to seiðr, one is bound to discover one common point to the majority of them: The origin, practice or practitioners of seiðr comes from outside the known and civilized world. This aspect of seiðr is maybe one of the most consistent features of the magical practice and can be found all the way from the earliest poetic accounts of seiðr in the Eddas to the youngest legendary sagas.
When it comes to mythology, both verse and prose are in accord that the practice of seiðr originates far from the realm of the gods. In Völuspá (22) (ibid. 6), the mysterious Heiðr, quite obviously an outsider figure, penetrates the society of the Æsir and start spreading her art despite being clearly unwelcome. In Baldrs Draumar (4) (ibid. 273), Óðinn must ride to the East, beyond the doors of Ásgárdr (þá reið Öðinn fyrir austan dyrr) in order to find the grave of a völva he intends to question. In Ynglinga saga (4) (ibid. 13), it is the Vanir goddess Freyja who teaches seiðr to the Æsir shortly after she enters their realm. In Lokasenna (24) (ibid. 98), Óðinn is described as practicing seiðr, not in Ásgárdr but rather on an otherwise unknown island named Sámsey.

In later prose sources and other sagas not concerned with the mythological whereabouts of the gods, the figure of the foreign seiðr-practitioner continues to develop and grow in scope. One very interesting feature is the geographical settings of acts of seiðr. These are almost always set in faraway lands, far from the general settings of the main story-arch. In Brennu-Njáls saga (30) (ibid. 80), which tells the tale of the Icelander Njáll Þorgeirsson, the only reference to seiðr is made when Njáls friend Gunnar Hámundarson sails in Norwegian waters. The account of Eiríks saga rauða (4) (ibid. 208 – 209) is likewise set in Greenland and it comes to the most richly described acts of seiðr set in Iceland, they happen to be performed by a family of migrants originating from the Hebrides (Laxdæla saga 35 and 37) (ibid. 99. 105 – 106). Such a propensity to associate acts and practitioners of seiðr to vaguely defined foreign lands can also be found in Yngliga saga (16) (ibid. 32 – 35). The story, then centered on East Sweden, takes an unexpected turn when a king dies from a curse set by a “Finnish" seiðkona.

This latest example also reveals another feature of such a peripheral vision of seiðr, namely their association with Sámi and other Finno-Ugric people. Besides the account discussed above, the sagas contain a wealth of references to Finnic practitioners of seiðr. One of the oldest extant mentions of seiðr can be found in the tenth-century Lausavísa of Vítgeir Seiðmaðr (ibid. Vol. I. 364). The short poem describes King Haraldr’s son with a Sámi princess, Rögnvaldr réttirbelini, as a seiðr-practitioner. Other notable examples are the Bjarmians in Örvar- Odds saga (19) (ibid. 281) who give birth and magically enhance Ögmundr or the fjölkunnig Sámi soothsayer who predicts the future of the hero Ingimundr in Vatnsdæla saga (10) (ibid. 28 – 29).
When all taken into account, only a tiny minority of *seiðr*-séances and *seiðr* practitioner appear to be insiders amongst the society they evolve in. Could this be due to a general distaste for the practice among the characters of the sagas or would this be an oversimplification? In the next Chapter, we will attempt to find out by analyzing the public views on *seiðr*.

**C) Public Views on *Seiðr***

Taking into consideration the fact that some of the earlier accounts of *seiðr* (Vitgeir Seiðmaðr’s *Lausavisa* (*ibid*. Vol. I. 364), *Völuspá* 22 (*ibid*. 6)) seem to paint *seiðr*-practitioners in a bad light and given the important percentage of nefarious *seiðr*-séance within our corpus, it would be legitimate to try to analyze public opinion and reactions towards *seiðr* and *seiðr*-practitioners. After a thorough review, two sets of attitudes towards these people can be identified: Violent rejection and indifference.

In the eddaic corpus at our disposal, we see the terms *völva* and *seiðr* described unfavorably on three occasions. The first occurrence, the description of the arrival of *seiðr* through Heiðr in *Völuspá* (22) (*ibid*. 6) has already been discussed at length and it will suffice to say that it is not unthinkable that part of the moral judgment that is passed on Heiðr and her activities could stem from the fact that no-one is in position to stop her actions. A couple of stanzas earlier, the Æsir have been confronted to Gullveig, a powerful woman that they were powerless to dispose of. Given that most modern scholar consider Gullveig and Heiðr to be the same figure (Simek 2007: 123 - 124), it would make sense that the gods, powerless when faced with Heiðr´s *seiðr* would be reduced to condemning it while unable to banish it. Later on in the *Poetic Edda*, in Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (*ibid*. 132) we observe the hero Sinfjötli taunting his adversary Guðmundr, accusing him of having been (or having behaved) like a *völva*: þú vart *völva* í Varinseyju (“you were a *völva* in varinseyju”). A similar insult can be found in *Lokasenna* 24 (*ibid*. 98); this it is Loki who taunts Óðinn for virtually the same practices. These three passages are the only verses that appear to paint a negative view of *seiðr*- practitioners. However, a certain number of later prose sources do follow the idea expressed in the *Poetic Edda*. Snorri himself tells reports that the practice of *seiðr* was not commendable among men and had to be passed unto goddesses:
Óðinn knew that craft that is accompanied by the greatest power, and he practiced it himself, that is called seiðr [...] but such great ergi accompanies this magic when it is practiced, that it was not thought shameless for men to pursue it, and the practice was taught to the goddesses. (Translation by Tolley, 2009 volume II; 164 – 165)

We see here a rather strong condemnation of the practice of seiðr among men, but nothing in our corpus appears to cast female practitioners of seiðr in a bad light in their quality as seiðr-practitioners. The picture is somehow darker for male practitioner of seiðr: later on in the redaction of his Heimskringla, towards the end of Haralds saga hins hárfragr (34) (ibid. 138 – 139), Snorri describes how the king of Norway, upon learning about his son Rögnvaldr’s meddling with seiðr, decides to summarily execute him and his retinue. A comparable story can be found later on in saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar (63) (ibid. 312). Here, the grandson of Rögnvaldr, Eyvindr kelda is seen in an open conflict with the king Ólafr Tryggvasonar who, just like his predecessor, ends up killing his seið-practitioner of opponent together with all his retinue.

However, once one steps out of the works of Snorri, one will find out that the image his work give to practitioners of seiðr appears at odds with the one found in the other sagas. Indeed, not considering Snorri, the seiðr-practitioner found in the saga was in no ways a pariah that was to be shunned or even killed on sight. In fact, several of them appear to have been well integrated in the society they evolved in and sometimes even assume positions of power. In Gisla saga Súrssonar (11) (ibid. 37), Þorgrímr nef appears quite close to Þorgrímr freysgoði and is even invited for a feast at his homestead. He is also lavishly paid (he receives a nine-year-old-cow for putting a curse on Gísli, (ibid. Chapter 18. 56- 57) and doesn’t appear socially estranged at all. In a similar fashion, Kotkell and his family of seiðmen are able to receive the friendship of powerful men upon establishing themselves in Iceland. They first befriend Hallsteinn goði (Laxdæla saga 35) (ibid. 99) then Þorleiks Höskuldssonar (36) (ibid. 100 – 101), both strongmen in their own right – Hallstein is even a goði, the de-facto chieftain of his area. Such socializing could hardly be characteristic of a social outcast.
Female seiðr practitioners also received some level of deference that set them apart front other women. Oddbjörg, in Viga-Glúms saga (12) (ibid. 41) received particularly good hospitality from her guests because of her practice of soothsaying. Þorbjörg receives an even more respectful welcome and the members of the household put themselves at her entire disposal in order for her to complete her seiðr-ritual. Some völur even receive payment for their performances like the ones in Völuspá (29) (ibid. 6) and Hrólf saga kraka (3) (ibid. 7). Even higher up on the social scale, Skuld, seen in the Chapter 48 of the latter Saga practicing seiðr, is married to the chieftain Hjörvarðr. In Egils saga (59) (Ed. Sigurður Nordal (1933). 176), we find Gunnhildr, ex-queen of Norway engaged in such a practice as well.

In fact, the only non-Snorri evidence in favor of seeing seiðr-practitioners as potentially having a lower status in society than other Norsemen would be the ignominious death of Þorgrímr nef and Kotkell’s family. Both accounts (GISLA saga Súrssonar 19 (ibid. 60) and Laxdæla saga 37 (ibid. 106 – 108)) have the seiðr-practitioners stoned to death in a rather crude way. Such treatment was however not reserved to practitioners of seiðr but to other spell casters as well like the nefarious Katla in Eyrbyggja saga (20) (Ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson (19). 54) or even Þorgrímr nef’s own sister, Auðbjörg (GISLA saga Súrssonar 19) (ibid. 60). According to Dillman (2006: 533 – 536), stoning was believed to be the only effective way to bring a lasting death to a magic-practitioner. All in all, despite the fact that seiðr-practitioners were almost systematically viewed as foreign and potentially holders of a strong disruptive force, these men and women were apparently not targeted by systematic public ire. The social situation of several of the most notable of those seiðr-practitioners could even be quite high up. The only element that could maybe set them apart from other Norsemen being the repeated accusation of ergi against them.

D) Seiðr and Ergi

One of the most common associations one could make with seiðr is the concept of ergi. Often translated as “wickedness” or “lewdness” (Zoëga 1910: 118), this rather cryptic term has its origins, and the origin of its association with seiðr in both the Older and the Younger Edda. In Ynglinga saga (7) (ibid. 19), Snorri associates seiðr with ergi, claiming that the practice of the former brings the latter to its (male) practitioner and that it is therefore only appropriate for females to become practitioners. This description of ergi as an activity
unsuitable for men resonates with the accounts of Lokasenna (24) (ibid. 98) and Helgakviða Hundingsbana I (37) (ibid. 132) where the title of völva appear used as an insult. However, among the two poems, the word ergi only appears in Lokasenna, on two occasions: as adjectives (args) used to describe first Loki and then Óðinn. However, in Skírnismál (36) (ibid. 73), Skírnir threaten to render Gerðr ergi by means of magic and in Þrymskviða (17) (ibid. 100) Þór appears to fear the possible accusation of ergi that could be directed against him after he dons a bridal veil. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned sources, it appears that ergi was not only associated with the practice of seiðr but rather with a general condition of un-manliness that could, among other things, be triggered by the engagement in seiðr rituals. Tolley skilfully deducts a more complete sense for ergi: [The condition of] opening oneself up for sexual penetration by an inappropriate person (Tolley 2009: 158).

In later sagas accounts, the association between seiðr and ergi is quite seldom made. We encounter on two occasions the term being used as an unspecified insult towards female spell-casters (Grettis saga 82 (ibid. 261), Kórmaks saga 23 (ibid. 290)) but these women are never associated with seiðr at any moment. In fact, the only occurrence of an actual seiðr-practitioner (other than Óðinn) being called ergi can be found in Gísla saga (18) (ibid. 56 – 57). There, Þorgrímr nef builds a seið-hjallr and fremur hann þetta fjölkynngilega með allri ergi og skelmiskap ("and performs it with all ergi and devilry": translation by Tolley 2009). While this account certainly establishes a link between the practice of seiðr and ergi, one should be wary that the text might simply be corrupted. Indeed, in the short version of the text, no mentions of ergi is made whatsoever and Dillman argues on linguistic grounds that this specific part of the saga might have been re-written by someone copying or being under the influence of Snorri’s Ynglinga saga account (Dillman 2006: 453 – 455). Dillman also points out how strange it would be to otherwise charge Þorgrímr nef with ergi, he a strong axe-wielding man (13) (ibid. 45), respected and invited to feasts by the godi and skilled in ironwork (11) (ibid. 37)?

Following Dillman’s and Tolley’s flawless reasoning, it would appear that, if a concept of ergi existed either in the Viking Age or in the minds of the sagas compilers, it could only in extremely rare occasions be applied to practitioners of seiðr. As we have seen, at the exception of Óðinn, no seiðr practitioner is ever described being or suffering from ergi. This point I think, should prove once and for all that practitioners of seiðr were definitely not seen as obscene or perverted individuals whose seiðr-magic would make them misfits in the world they evolve in.
Conclusion

We started the present study with one question in mind to solve: Do the accounts found in mediaeval Icelandic literature permit us to talk about a consistent magical practice or phenomenon named seiðr? There is very little doubt that, following the rigorous review, discussion and presentation of all trustworthy sources pertaining to the practice of seiðr, we have managed to clarify certain characteristics of seiðr that are often overlooked: It is our opinion that seiðr accounts found in mediaeval Icelandic literature give a fairly homogenous picture of seiðr and seiðr practitioner. This mysterious art, often talked about but rarely understood appears to have originated from the outer parts of the known-world. Its practitioners likewise, are often outsiders that may potentially have links to the Sámi people. These practitioners are called a variety of names such as seið-maðr or völva and rarely act for their own benefit: they can weave spells using sound and their singing can at times be beautiful to hear. These spell casters can be male or female, and operate alone or in a group. Soothsaying is the exclusive domain of the seið-kona while a great variety of spells, both benevolent and deadly can also be used. Despite the fact that their magical aptitudes appear innate, many practitioners choose to use a platform or a high seat when performing a ritual as each and every of their performance require some kind of planning. Lastly, while they often appear as outsiders, many seiðr-practitioner can become an integral part of the world they are evolving as very little to no stigma is attached to the practice of their craft. Practitioners of seiðr seem in many ways connected to different universes: while they are firmly established as supernatural emissaries from distant lands, they do not forget how grounded they are in here and now.
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27


### B) Secondary Sources


