

# THE IMAGE OF SEIÐR IN OLD ICELANDIC LITERATURE:

## CONSISTENCY OR VARIATION?



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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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## 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 (Schjødt 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 *Landnámabók* 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 *Eiríks 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 Herraúðs* 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-stafr*, *seið-berendr*, *seið-hjallr*, *seið-læti*) 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 *réttilbeini*, 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), *Hynðluljóð* (33) (*ibid.* 289)) and five other references to *völva* figures (*Völuspá* (22) (*ibid.* 6), *Hávamál* (87) (*ibid.* 29), *Baldrs Draumar* (4) (*ibid.* 273), *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (37) (*ibid.* 132) and *Hynðluljóð* (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 *Hynðluljóð* (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 *Hynðluljóð* (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 Viðólfi and *seiðberendr* come from Svarthöfði, two obscure figures, potentially *jötnar* whose existence are unattested outside *Hynðluljóð* (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 *Hynðuljóð* 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 Sigmundur. 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 “Finland” 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 *fjölunnigu 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 *hásæti* (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 *Víga-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 *Hávamál* (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 (*Hrólfs 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 *Baldurs 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 *lítivölva* (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 *völvu* 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 crozier, 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.

Eíríks saga rauða (4)	Night	Public (hall) Greenland	Prophecy	Hásæti + Spells ♀♀
Örvar-Odds saga (2)	Night	Public (hall) Norway	Prophecy	∅ ♀♀♂♂
Örvar-Odds saga (19)	∅	∅ Bjarmaland	Protection (swords)	∅ ♂♂
Hrólfs saga kraka (3)	∅	Public (hall) Denmark	Prophecy	Seiðhjall ♀
Hrólfs saga kraka (48)	∅	∅ Danemark	∅	Spells ♀
Hrólfs saga kraka (51)	Day	Private/Public Danemark	Metamorphosis	Seiðhjall ♀
Víga-Glums saga (12)	∅	Public Iceland	Prophecy	∅ ♀
Friðþjófs saga hins frækna (5)	∅	Private Norway	∅ (Weather?)	Seiðhjall ♀♀
Ynglinga saga (16 – 17 )	∅	∅ Sweden/Finland	Drawing/ Curse/Murder	∅ ♀
Landnámabók (S 179)	∅	Public Norway	Prophecy	∅ ♀
Skáldskaparmál (26)	∅	Private ∅ (Mythology)	Healing	Spells ♀
Lokasenna (24)	∅	Private ∅ (Mythology)	∅	Vétt ♂
Saga Ólafs Tryggvasonar (63)	Night/ Morning	Private Norway	Weather	∅ ♂♂
Sigurðardrápa (3)	∅	∅ (Mythology)	Love/ Manipulation	∅ ♂
Laxdæla saga (35 and 37)	Day/Night	Private Iceand	weather/ drawing/murder	Seiðhjall ♂♂♀
Hákonar saga góða (12)	∅	∅ Norway	Transfer of mental abilities	∅ ♂♂
Egils saga (59)	∅	∅ England	Curse/ Drawing	∅ ♀
Brennu-Njáls saga (30)	∅	∅ Norway	Protection (swords)	∅ ♂
Kormáks saga (6)	∅	∅ Iceland	Curse/ Repulsion	∅ ♀
Vatnsdæla saga (10)	Evening/ Night?	Public (hall) Norway	Prophecy	∅ ♀
Gísla saga Súrssonar(18)	∅	Private Iceland	Curse/ Repulsion	(seið)hjall ♂
Landnámabók (V, 29)	∅	∅ Norway	Fertility	∅ ♀

## 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), *Örvar-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. Þórolfsson 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 *seiðmenn* 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 Hrólfr. 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* compiled 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 *Örvar-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 *Örvar-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 *Örvar-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 *Örvar-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 *Örvar-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 hins 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 *hásæti* (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 *fjöllkuninga 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 *seiðr* 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 *Örvar-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 fögur 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"]). *Galdr* was not only limited to nefarious magic: in *Skáldskaparmál* (26) (*ibid.* 134 – 135), the *völva* Groá makes use of *galdr* in order to heal Þórr'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 Ögmundur 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 *Baldurs Draumar* (4) (*ibid.* 273) as well.

*Galdr* 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 dully 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 *Grímnismál* in reference to Heimdall. This *vörðr* 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 fulfilment 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 be 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, unsuspecting hero (*Örvar-Odds saga* 2 (*ibid.* 105), *Víga-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 Óðinn 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 *Lausavisa* of Vitgeir Seiðmaðr (*ibid.* Vol. I. 364). The short poem describes King Haraldr’s son with a Sámi princess, Rögnvaldr *réttilbeini*, 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 *fjölunnig* 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 Guðmunðr, 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 kunni þá íþrótt, er mestr máttur fylgði, ok framdi sjálfr, er *seiðr* heitir [...] En þessi fjölkyngi, er framit er, fylgir svá mikil ergi, at eigi þótti karlmönnum skamlaust við at fara, ok var gyðjunum kend sú íþrótt (*Ynglinga saga* 7. 19)

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 hárfagra* (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 *Gísla 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 from 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 Gunnhilðr, 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 (*Gísla 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 (*Gísla 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 *Brymskviða* (17) (*ibid.* 100) Þórr 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 *goði* 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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