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***MANNFRÆÐI* AND *MANNJAFNAÐR*  
AND THEIR RELATION TO GAMES**

**Introduction**

One of the many aspects of playing games and their descriptions in Icelandic Sagas is the view of masculinity that they reveal. Saga authors often introduce an upcoming protagonist in a certain, very original way. Those *mannfræði* which deal with sporting skills of a man can be found in almost every literary Old Norse source in Iceland. Characters and personages in the sagas are described as skilled, handsome, and with many attributes. But not all character descriptions contain information about their strength or skills in sports. These character descriptions and *mannjanfðr* (“comparisons of men”) are often related to sporting activities, as the saga authors use the episodes of sporting events for character presentations and comparisons. This essay will examine how the sports and game-playing skills mentioned in the sagas are narratively integrated with individual character descriptions, pointing out that the sagas’ depictions of masculinity are specific to the cultural paradigm in question. The first part will examine introductions of new characters in their respective sagas, the characters’ sporting skills forming an important formulaic component in such introductions. I will then move on to consider comparisons between male protagonists in relation to their skills, which are integral parts of the contest. I interpret *mannjanfðr* as a game in itself, and there are insights to be gained from thus regarding it. Each of these phenomena reveals particular ramifications for how masculinity was culturally constructed and understood.

## Descriptions of characters and their relation to sport and games

Hermann Pálsson refers to this practice using the term *mannfræði*. He understands this term in a twofold way:

...it denoted the discipline of knowing and understanding important people of the past; it has been tentatively translated as ‘personality lore’. Whereas *ættfræði* or *áttvísi* “genealogy” dealt with kinship... *mannfræði* was concerned with individuals, their personal qualities and achievements, what made each man stand out from the rest. Secondly, *mannfræði* had a much wider application, referring to the study of human nature in general... *Mannfræði* seems to have been an important aspect of traditional lore before saga writing began...<sup>1</sup>.

Hermann Pálsson states that those descriptions were “tradition bearers” and used consequently by the saga writers. As one of the outstanding examples he sees Ári Þorgilsson’s *Ævi Snorra goða*<sup>2</sup>. The text is an account of the life of Snorri góði, who lived between 963 and 1031. At the beginning Ári wrote the list of Snorri’s children with short descriptions of them. One may agree with Pálsson that “character delineation was an important feature of the sagas and must derive from traditional *mannfræð*, as it was practiced in the pre-literary period”<sup>3</sup>.

The longest saga and the apex of saga writing, *Brennu-Njáls saga* includes twenty-six skillfully made character sketches. It is worth to consider them as examples of character descriptions. These portraits and their quality have been examined by many scholars<sup>4</sup>. It became a narrative pattern used by saga writers, not only for main protagonists but also for marginal characters who appear just once or twice and receive little attention in the plot otherwise. It would not be incorrect to adapt Einar Ól. Sveinsson’s words about the character sketches from *Njáls saga* to other sagas, as we know the accounts and the presentation of characters are similar in every saga. In his work about *Njáls saga* he states that:

“In some cases the author shows us a picture of the external appearance of his characters. In all cases he affords us a description of their internal nature, of their mental disposition and temperament. To be sure, we may sometimes have questions regarding the true motives of the characters when under strong emotional stress... But in all these cases we will arrive at a satisfactory understanding if we read the saga thoughtfully and with an open mind. In so doing we must be careful not to jump to conclusions regarding any of the

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<sup>1</sup> H. Pálsson, *Oral Tradition and Saga Writing*, Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia 3, Viena 1999, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ævi Snorra goða*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk Fornrit IV, Reykjavík 1935, pp. 185–186.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. .

<sup>4</sup> P.V. Rubow, *Smaa kritiske Breve*, Copenhagen, 1936, p. 30; H. Pálsson, *Oral Tradition...*, pp. 63–64; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A literary Masterpiece*, Lincoln 1971, pp. 85–116.

characters on the basis of the first impression or of a single episode. It is necessary to keep in mind everything a character says and does, without subtracting anything from or adding anything to the author's account. And it goes without saying that we must not indulge in speculation regarding the historical reliability of this or that scene or character"<sup>5</sup>.

There is nothing to argue against this passage. The saga authors show exactly what they wanted to show to the reader. These character portrayals in the sagas need not always be untrue. As it was mentioned earlier, the descriptions of Snorri góði and his children do not have to be an imagination of Ari fróði. The same could probably be said about other famous characters from sagas who are known to have existed in early medieval Iceland. Einar Ól. Sveinsson draws attention to the fact that the authors intentionally embellished (overrun) descriptions of the characters and that we should "make an honest effort to see and understand the author's characters as he portrayed them"<sup>6</sup>. Later he posited a question whether those portrayals are good or faulty, stating that we must accept them as they are presented to the reader.

It may be argued that saga authors, in their capacity as individuals, may unavoidably have held certain biases towards the characters they presented, and we cannot know which of these narrative descriptions bear any semblance to real-life qualities of the people they described. The question which always comes to the scholar's mind is who exactly the saga writer is describing and in which level this description works with a true personage. The descriptions that concern this essay are rather simple, and there is no need to examine them in the entire spectrum of character portrayal concerning his actions and deeds outside the immediate context of the games.

In the Icelandic family sagas, one may distinguish some groups of characters described by using a reference to some skills in sports. One may begin by looking at the ways of describing men according to their social status (specifically men, as there are no descriptions of women which could be linked to sports, even though they did play board games), if he is a king, a chieftain, a hero or a simple farmer.

In all, there are almost 200 character descriptions which include sporting activities or skills in sports<sup>7</sup>. Looking at them, one may clearly see a pattern for *mannfræði*, which is almost always presented in one specific order: name, physical skills (accomplishments), appearance, character traits. Sometimes if a saga author wanted to point out great skills of a character he added one of the following terms: "one of the best", (*mest*, "the greatest," "overbearing", *ok allra mana bestvígr*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, pp. 85–86.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.

<sup>7</sup> According to unpublished Sæmundur Guðmundssons from Háskóli Íslands, huge database of all sporting activities in Old Icelandic literary corpus which was kindly given to me by him.

(“better than anyone else”)<sup>8</sup>, *at eigi váu hans jafningjar* (“no one could compare with him”)<sup>9</sup>, *at ekki helzt við þeim* (“no one could be a match with them”), *sterkastur jafn gamall*, (“the strongest of his contemporaries”)<sup>10</sup>, *allra manna vænstur* (“superior to other men in all skills”)<sup>11</sup>.

As mentioned above, *Njáls saga* has numerous character descriptions, but in only few cases is there mention of sports. One of the personages described in the saga is Gunnarr from Hildarendi. Einar Ól. Sveinsson wrote that “his portrait and personality bear the stamp of a later age”<sup>12</sup>. With suggestion that “historical inaccuracies are of importance only if they are detrimental to the verisimilitude of the literary work“ and they have nothing to do with aesthetic enjoyment of the saga<sup>13</sup>. This “artistic” presentation undoubtedly is a matter of examination by a literature scholar, but the interdisciplinary point of view concentrated on games which I am representing does not allow me to go into this important issue. Moreover, sagas which were alive in the Middle Ages (oral or written) had a great influence on the contemporaries and future generations.

A closer look at the sources shows how important *mannfræði* was and the prominent degree to which games figured in character introductions in the Icelandic Sagas.

*Droplaugarsona saga*, (chapter 2)

*Helgi var mikill maðr vexti ok vænn ok sterkr, gleðimaðr ok hávaðasamr. Hann vildi ekki um búnað hugsa. Vígr var hann manna beztr. Grimr var mikill maðr vexti ok afrendr at afli, hljóðlátr ok stilltr vel. Hann var búmaðr mikill. Þeir bræðr vöndu sik alls kyns íþróttum, ok þóttu þeir þar fyrir öllum ungunum í allri atferð sinni, svá at þeira jafningjar fengusk eigi.*

“Helgi was a big man in stature, and handsome and strong, a cheery man and assertive. He had no interest at all in farming. He was as skilled in arms as any man. Grim was a big man in stature and very strong, as well as taciturn and calm tempered. He was a great farmer. Those brothers trained themselves in skills of every kind, and they were regarded as foremost among all young men in everything they did, so that their equals were nowhere to be found”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XII, Reykjavík 1954, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> *Egils saga*, ed. by Sigurðr Nordal, Íslenzk Fornrit XII, Reykjavík 1933, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Gull-Þóris saga Þorskfirðinga saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavík, 2009, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk Fornrit V, Reykjavík 1934, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 88–89.

<sup>14</sup> *Droplaugssona saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Reykjavík 1950, pp. 141–142; *The Saga of Droplaug's Sons*, [in:] *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. II, Reykjavík 1997, Vol. IV, p. 357 (Later as “CSI”).

*Fljótsdæla saga* (chapter 9)

*Núú fara þeir upp með Bersa, ok er hann ástsamligr til þeirra bræðra, en lagði þó meira stund á at kenna (...) Helgi var mikill maðr vexti, ljósjarpr á hár ok rauðli-taðr, breiðleitr ok hinn kurteisasti, en þat þótti helzt at yfirlitum Helga, at hann var mun-nljótr.*

“Then they went up with Bersi, and he was affectionate to the brothers, though he spent more time teaching Helgi physical feats (...) Helgi was a man of large stature, with light chestnut-coloured hair and a ruddy complexion and a broad face; he was a very courteous man, and the most noted thing about his appearance was that he had an ugly mouth”<sup>15</sup>.

*Ólafs saga ins helga* (chapter 21)

*Einarr hafi verit allra manna sterkastr ok beztr bogmaðr, er verit hafi í Nóreg, ok var harðskeyti hans um fram alla menn aðra. Hann skaut með bakkakólfi í gognum uxahúð hráblauta, er hekk á ási einum. Skíðfærr var hann allra manna bezt. In mesti var hann íþróttamaðr ok hreystimaðr. Hann var ættstór ok auðigr.*

“Einar was a man of enormous strength and the best archer that ever lived in Norway; and his hard shooting excelled that of all other men. With a blunt-headed arrow he could shoot through a raw oxhide suspended from a beam. He was a most skilled runner on skis, a great athlete, and most courageous. He was of noble kin and wealthy”<sup>16</sup>.

*Hálfðánar saga Eysteinnssonar* (chapter 7)

*Grimr inn ellri var svá stórr vexti, at fáir váru hans líkar. Hann var sterkr ok fimr við alla leika ok var opt at leikum með konungsmönnum á skotbakka ok at knat-tleikum.*

“The younger Grim had a great talent for games, particularly archery, but never took part in trials of strength. He was a first-rate shot with handbow and crossbow”<sup>17</sup>.

*Brennu-Njáls saga* (chapter 25)

*Skarpheðinn hét inn ellsti; hann var mikill maðr vexti ok styrkr; vígr vel, syndr sem selr; manna fóthvatastr, skjótráðar og øruggr, gagnorðr ok skjótorðr, en þó longum vel stilltr.*

“Skarpheðin was the eldest, a big and strong man and a good fighter. He swam like a seal and was swift of foot, quick to make up his mind and sure of himself”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> *Fljótsdæla saga*, Íslenzk Fornrit XI, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Reykjavík 1950, p. 236; *The Saga of the People of Fljótsdal*, [w:] *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, Vol. IV, p. 393.

<sup>16</sup> *Ólafs saga Helga*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVII, Reykjavík 1945, p. 27; Snorri Sturluson, Óláfr Haraldsson (The Saint), [in:] *Heimskringla*, Vol. II, transl. by Alison Finlay, Anthony Faulkes, London 2014, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Hálfðánar saga Eysteinnssonar, Fornaldarsögur Nordrlanda*, Vol. IV, ed. by Guðni Jónsson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Reykjavík 1944, p. 256; *Hálfðánar saga Eysteinnssonar*, [in:] *Seven Viking Romances*, ed. by Herman Pálsson, Paul Edwards, London 1986, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 70; *Njal's saga*, CSI, Vol. III, 30.

*Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*

*hann var snemmendis bæði mikill ok sterkr ok vel at iþróttum búinn, því at þá er hann var sjau vetra, samvægði hann inn? sterkustum mönnum um afl ok allar iþróttir.*

“[Orm] was big and strong from an early age and highly accomplished in skills, because by the time he was seven years old he was the equal of the mightiest men in strength and all skills/sports”<sup>19</sup>.

| Name    | Saga              | Look  | Character  | Skills  | Profession                    |
|---------|-------------------|---|--|---|-------------------------------|
| Ospak   | Bandamanna s.     |   | overbearing and very assertive                                       | big and strong, immensely strong                                  | cargo business                |
| Gunnar  | Brennu-Njáls s.   | handsome and fair of skin and hair straight   |  | big, strong, excellent fighter, swift in sword                    |                               |
| Sigmund | Brennu-Njáls s.   | handsome, bisterous, sarcastic and overbearing  | courteous  | full of ambition and good poet and skilled in most sports         | sea-faring merchant           |
| Helgi   | Droplaugssona s.  | big man in stature, handsome  | a cheery man and assertive   | Skilled in arms, foremost among all young men                     | no interest at all in farming |
| Grim    | Droplaugssona s.  | big man in stature  | taciturn and calm tempered   | very strong   | strong                        |
| Helgi   | Fljótsdæla s.     | large stature, with light chestnut-coloured hair, ruddy complexion, broad face, an ugly mouth | very courteous man   | physical feats  |                               |
| Þórðr   | Þórðar saga hreðu | well built, strong, handsome imposing   | generous, affable and a oyal friend, good company, generally popular | excelent all-round sportsman, a better swimmer than everyone else | talented poet                 |

The examples here show the way of presenting new characters in the saga narratives. In the first example from *Droplaugssona saga* we see two brothers who are almost the same in physical strength but they differ in an attitude to farming. We can see in this *mannfræði* also an element of comparison between brothers. In the second example again we see brothers who are above average in comparison to others but elder Bersi is teaching Helgi in skills. Next examples present a motif used in sagas where people were considered by authors as the strongest in Iceland or Norway. Even though they were living at the same times. That brings the question of regional identity and creation of regional heroes (unfortunately there is no space

<sup>19</sup> *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavík 2009, p. 70; *Orm Stórolfsson's tale*, CSI, Vol. III, 455.

here to go further on this subject). Sometimes good character goes together with skills and handsome appearance, but it is not the general rule. Many times we encounter characters being introduced as skilled in sports, yet they differ in character and in physical looks. The only consistency is that they are good in *íþróttir*.

The table above shows just some of these descriptions in a schematic way. The examples in the table have been chosen because not many of the descriptions are fitting into all categories I have made. As the table shows, in the narration introducing a character we can clearly see the importance of games and skills. This idea comes from the broader interests of the Norse people in physical skills. These skills were considered among pre-requisites for an ideal man, perfect warrior, and important personage. Men were expected to be good at sports to present themselves as leaders, chieftains or even kings.

### *Mannjafnaðr* – comparison of men as a game

The classic example of *mannjafnaðr* can be seen in *Magnússona saga*<sup>20</sup>. There, the two kings Sigurðr and Eysteinn, who are brothers, exchange insults with each other and claim that one is better than the other at sporting activities. In this fragment we can see another aspect of mentioning games which are used rather as a literary motif than an attempt to show what the actual Old Norse games were. It is said here that it was customary for men to compare themselves while drinking. We can see it also in the make-believe games (e.g. *Ynglinga saga* – chapter 34) where children try to be better than others<sup>21</sup>. But focusing on Sigurðr and Eysteinn, it is worth emphasizing that they start quarrelling as a result of games and then they move on to more important matters such as their reigns and their expeditions. The games were the easiest, simplest and quickest forms of proving the strength of a man. And as it was written in this saga, the games and sports which require agility belong to the leading group. What is interesting is that they start comparing themselves by saying that they have equal status and position.

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<sup>20</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* in chapter 61 expresses the idea that the comparison of men took place while they were drinking: *þar var margt talat er menn vóru drukkknir mjök, ok kom þar at rætt var um mannjöfnuð, Orkneyinga saga*, ed. by Finnboði Guðmundsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXXIV, Reykjavík 1965, p. 134. We see it also in *Flóamanna saga*, ed. by Þórhallur Vilmundarson, Bjarni Vilhálmsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XIII, Reykjavík 1991, p. 304: *þeir fóru í mannjöfnuð ok töluðu um Þorgils ok Eirek; Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, *Íslenzk Fornrit* IV, Reykjavík 1935, p. 98: *þar var ölteiti mörg, þar var talat um mannjöfnuð, ok hverr þar væri göfgastr maðr í sveit eðr mestr höfðingi ok urðu menn þar eigi á eitt sáttir, sem optast verðr ef um mannjöfnuð er talað*, and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal, Guðni Jónsson, Íslenzk Fornrit III, Reykjavík 1938, p. 66: *Þorsteinn svarar, ekki ferr ek í mannjöfnuð, segir hann*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ynglinga saga*, [in:] *Heimskringla* I, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVI, Reykjavík 1941, pp. 63–64.

Karen Swenson notes that the entire saga is a prelude to the flying of the kings, and it is worthwhile now to describe the characters as well as their actions and the events in which they were involved<sup>22</sup>. The first chapter tells about King Eysteinn's and Sigurðr's division of duties. One is going to govern at home while the other will lead expeditions abroad. The following chapters up to 16 deal with the brothers' deeds (especially those of Sigurðr). In chapter 16 there is a description of King Eysteinn: he is handsome, wise-minded in all knowledge, laws, judgements and histories, sagacious and wise-spoken; eloquent, cheerful, amiable, beloved by all people<sup>23</sup>. The following chapter describes Sigurðr as imposing but not handsome, not amiable, of few words, a good and staunch friend, not very talkative, well-mannered and stately, a good ruler and stern punisher who keeps the law well, generous with wealth, powerful and famous<sup>24</sup>. One may see that they both are presented in a positive way, with some differences. In chapter 18 the reader knows that their brother, Óláfr, died and left them the kingdom. The following chapter "presents, first, Eysteinn's dalliance – innocent, if we believe the evidence of the ordeal of carrying hot iron – with the woman Borghil-dr, and, second, Sigurðr's active acquisition of her as his concubine and mother of his son"<sup>25</sup>. In the next chapter we see the naming of Sigurðr's wife and her relatives. Those two chapters reveal to the reader the differences between these brothers and prepare for the verbal conflict which is going to happen. Finally in chapter 21 we see the brothers, sitting at the table and drinking. It is worth quoting the whole *mannjafnaðr* here:

*Þá mælti Eysteinn konungur: "Sá ölsiður hefir oft verið að menn taka sér jafnaðarmenn. Vil eg hér svo vera láta". Þá þagði Sigurður konungur: "Sé eg", segir Eysteinn konungur; "að eg verð hefja þessa teiti. Mun eg taka þig bróðir til jafnaðarmanns mér. Færi eg það til að jafnt nafn höfum við báðir og jafna eign. Geri eg engi mun ættar okkarrar eða uppfæðslu". Þá svarar Sigurður konungur: "Manstu eigi það er eg braut þig á bak ef eg vildi og varstu vetri eldri?" Þá segir Eysteinn konungur: "Eigi man eg hitt síður er þú fékkst eigi leikið það er mjúkleikur var í". Þá mælti Sigurður konungur: "Manstu hversu fór um sunðið með okkur? Eg mátti kefja þig ef eg vildi". Eysteinn konungur segir: "Ekki svam eg skemmra en þú og eigi var eg verr*

<sup>22</sup> K. Swenson, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*, Columbia, SC 1991, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Eysteinn konungur var maðr inn friðasti sýnum, bláeygrr, ok nokkut opineygr, bleikhárr ok hrokkinhárr, ekki hárr meðalmaðr, speklíngur at viti, at öllu fróðr, lögum ok dæmum ok mannfræði, ráðs njallr ok orðspakr ok inn snjallasti, manna glaðastr ok litillátast, hugþekkr ok ástsæll allri alþýðu, Magnússona saga, [in:] *Heimskringla I*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk Fornrit XXVIII, Reykjavík 1951, p. 256.*

<sup>24</sup> *Sigurður konungur var maðr mikill vexti ok jarpr á hárr, skörlígr, ekki fagr, vel vaxinn, snæfurlígr, fámæltr ok optast ekki þýðr, vingóðr ok fastúðigr, ekki talaðr mjök, siðlátr ok veglátr. Sigurður konungur var stjórnsamr ok refsingasamr, helt vel login, mildr af fé, ríkr ok ágætr, Magnússona saga, p. 256.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.



*kafsyndur. Eg kunni og á ísleggjum svo að engan vissi eg þann er það keppti við mig en þú kunnir það eigi heldur en naut”. Sigurður konungur segir: “Höfðinglegri íþrótt og nytsamlegri þykir mér sú að kunna vel á boga. Ætla eg að þú nýtir eigi boga minn þótt þú spyrnir fótum í”. Eysteinn svarar: “Ekki em eg bogsterkur sem þú en minna mun skilja beinskeyti okkra og miklu kann eg betur á skiðum en þú og hafði það verið enn fyrr kölluð góð íþrótt”. Sigurður konungur segir: “Þess þykir mikill munur að það er höfðinglega að sá er yfirmaður skal vera annarra manna sé mikill í flokki, sterkur og vopnfær betur en aðrir menn og auðsær og auðkenndur þá er flestir eru saman”. Eysteinn konungur segir: “Eigi er það síður einkanna hlutur að maður sé fríður og er sá og auðkenndur í mannfjölda. Þykir mér það og höfðinglegt því að fríðleikinum sómir hinn besti búnaður. Kann eg og miklu betur til laga en þú og svo, hvað sem við skulum tala, em eg miklu sléttorðari”. Sigurður konungur svarar: “Vera kann að þú hafir numið fleiri lögprettu því að eg átti þá annað að starfa. En engi frýr þér sléttmælis en hitt mæla margir að þú sért eigi allfastorður og lítið mark sé hverju þú heitir, mælir eftir þeim er þá eru hjá og er það ekki konunglegt”. Eysteinn konungur svarar: “Það ber til þess, er menn bera mál sín fyrir mig, þá hygg eg að því fyrst að lúka svo hvers manns máli að þeim mætti best þykja. Þá kemur oft annar sá er mál á við hann og verður þá oft dregið til að miðla svo að báðum skuli líka. Hitt er og oft að eg heiti því sem eg em beðinn því að eg vildi að allir færu fegnir frá mínum fundi. Sé eg hinn kost ef eg vil hafa, sem þú gerir, að heita öllum illu en engi heyri eg efndanna frýja”. Sigurður konungur segir: “Það hefir verið mál manna að ferð sú er eg fór úr landi væri heldur höfðingleg en þú sast heima meðan sem dóttir föður þíns”. Eysteinn konungur svarar: “Nú greipstu á ký-línu. Eigi mundi eg þessa ræðu vekja ef eg kynni hér engu svara. Nær þótti mér hinu að eg gerði þig heiman sem systur mína áður þú yrðir búinn til ferðar”. Sigurður konungur segir: “Heyrt muntu hafa það að eg átti orustur mjög margar í Serklandi er þú munt heyrt hafa getið og fékk eg í öllum sigur og margs konar gersemar, þær er eigi hafa slíkar komið hingað til lands. Þótti eg þar mest verður er eg fann göfgasta menn en eg hygg að eigi hafir þú enn hleypt heimdraganum”. Eysteinn konungur svarar: “Spurt hefi eg það að þú áttir orustur nokkurar utanlands en nytsamlegra var hitt landi voru er eg gerði meðan. Eg reisti fimm kirkjur af grundvelli og gerði eg höfn við Agðanes er áður var öræfi og hvers manns för, þá er fer norður eða suður með landi. Eg gerði og stöpulinn í Sinhólmssundi og höllina í Björgyn meðan þú brytjaðir blámenn fyrir fjandann á Serklandi. Ætla eg það lítið gagn ríki voru”. Sigurður konungur segir: “För eg í ferð þeirri lengst út til Jórdanar og lagðist eg yfir ána. En út á bakkannum er kjarr nokkuð en þar á barrinu reið eg knút og mælti eg svo fyrir að þú skyldir leysa bróðir eða hafa ellegar þvilikan formála sem þar var á lagður”. Eysteinn konungur segir: “Eigi mun eg leysa þann knút er þú reiðst mér en riða mátti eg þér þann knút er miklu síður fengir þú leyst, þá er þú sigldir einskipa í her minn, þá er þú komst í land”. Eftir það þögnuðu þeir báðir og var hvortveggi reiður. Fleiri hlutir urðu þeir í skiptum þeirra bræðra er það fannst á að hvor dró sig fram og sitt mál og vildi hvor vera öðrum meiri. En hélt þó fríður milli þeirra meðan þeir lifðu<sup>26</sup>*

King Eysteinn said, “It has been the custom for men when drinking to choose someone to compare themselves with. Let us do so now”. To that, King Sigurth said noth-

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, pp. 259–260; Translated as *Saga of the Sons of Magnús*, [in:] Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla. History of the Kings of Norway*, transl. by Lee M. Hollander, Austin 1964, p. 703.

ing. “I see”, said king Eysteinn, “that it behooves me to start this entertainment. I shall choose you, brother, for my match. And I shall start by saying that we two have the same title and equal possessions. There is no difference between our birth and upbringing. Then king Sigurth replied, “Do you remember that I had the better of you in wrestling whenever I wanted to, though you were a year older?” Then king Eystein answered, “I recall as well that you were no match for me in agility. King Sigurth replied, “Do you remember how it was with our swimming, and that I could duck you whenever I wanted to?” King Eystein said, “I could swim as far as you could, nor was I worse at diving. Also, I was so good at skating that I did not know anyone who could vie with me; but you were not better at that than a cow”. King Sigurth said, “A more chieftainly sport, and a more useful one, it seems to me, is to shoot well with bow and arrow. And I believe you would not be able to stretch my bow even though you used both feet [to stretch it]”. King Eystein answered, “I am not as strong at the bow as you are; but there is less difference between our marksmanship. And I am better at the use of skins than you, and that has also been considered a worthwhile accomplishment”. King Sigurth said: “It is considered more chieftainly that he who is to command other should stand tall in a group and be stronger and more practiced in arms than others and be easily seen and recognized when men are gathered”. King Eystein said, “It is no less distinctive that a man be handsome. And then he is no less easily recognized in a multitude. That too seems to me chieftainly, because fine clothes go best with a handsome exterior. Also, I have better knowledge of the laws than you; and whatever the subject, I am by far the better speaker”.

The word which describes the situation used by Snorri is a “flyting”. Karen Swenson lists it with other words as terms denoting segments of the text. She put together *hvot*, *níð*, *spá*, *mannjafnaðr* and *senna* and explains that “these terms, used to define texts or segments of texts by naming them, indicate a poetic self-consciousness, a cultural awareness of literary form and content that often goes unnoticed or eludes definition by an uninitiated modern audience”<sup>27</sup>. Those terms are seen now in a different context and it is hard to match them to the modern definitions because we live in a different society now.

The Cleasby and Vigfusson Dictionary provides a translation of these words as follows: *mannjafnaðr* (“a comparison of men”); *níð* (“contumely”) or insulting

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<sup>27</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen defines *níð* runes: “*Níð* signifies gross insults of a symbolic kind. Usually the allegation is to the effect that the person who is the object of *níð* is a passive homo-sexual or has been used in this way, thus that he is *ragr*. The purpose of *níð* is to terminate a period of peace or accentuate a breach of the peace and isolate an opponent from society by declaring that he is unworthy to be a member. The man attacked must show that he is fit to remain in the community, by behaving as a man in the system of Norse ethics; that is to say, he must challenge his adversary to battle, or avenge himself by blood-revenge. The typical form of *níð*, or at any rate the most effective, was in verse; but judging by the laws and literary instances, prose of similar content had more or less the same effect”. P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: concepts of sexual defamation in early Northern society*, The Viking Collection Studies in Northern Civilization 1, Odense 1983; Swenson, *Performing Definition...*, p. 28.

display; *senna* (“high words, gibing”)<sup>28</sup>, also “a dispute in which each contends that his hero is the greatest”. From those three, *níð*, which is an insult, is not related to any gaming activity that occurs in the sources examined by me for this purpose. Insulting is a very common type of action shown in Old Norse literature and it was a part of tradition<sup>29</sup>. People who used Old Icelandic distinguished *mannjafnaðr* from other genres of insult and it seems to be a representation of a native category which resembles competition and games<sup>30</sup>. The difference between *senna* and *mannjafnaðr* seems to be in the actions which are taken on by an opponent. The first one is an attack on the opponent and the degradation of his personage, while the second is based on speaking favourably of himself.

The episode from *Magnússona saga* is performed for the sake of diversion. Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos see evidence for this in Eysteinn’s proposal with the words *fám oss ölteiti nökkur*. They write that the contest between the kings, “is occasioned by complaints about Sigurðr’s arrogance since his travels abroad. It seems that Eysteinn intends to injure Sigurðr’s pride”<sup>31</sup>.

Eysteinn challenges Sigurðr by explicitly stating that one precondition is fulfilled. Sigurðr accepts the challenge by further developing this topic although arguing against their supposed equality in other respects...the contender that is challenged accepts the challenge by performing the first move in the game. This supposition is supported by formal qualities of the interaction, that is, the pattern of subsequent moves...<sup>32</sup>.

The same event is described also by the author of *Morkinskinna*. But here the action, as Marianne Kalinke writes, “is presented less as an accepted sport than as the result of Eysteinn’s efforts to determinate the cause of Sigurðr’s moroseness, and as expression of a previously unspoken displeasure at the haughty demeanor of the former Crusades”<sup>33</sup>. The starting point for the case is the disparity between the two brothers, one is a warrior and adventurer and the other stays at home as an administrator. This is the magisterial flyting of the saga<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> *An Icelandic-English dictionary, based on the ms. collections of the late Richard Cleasby. Enl. and completed by Gudbrand Vigfússon*, Oxford: MA 1874, p. 1121

<sup>29</sup> The best example can be seen in mythology. The whole poem of *Lokasenna* is nothing else but an insulting of Loki. See, U. Dronke, *The Poetic Edda*, Vol I, Oxford 1969, pp. 332–348.

<sup>30</sup> M. Bax, T. Padmos, *Two types of verbal dueling in Old Icelandic: the interactional structure of the senna and mannjafnaðr in Hábarðsljóð*, “Scandinavian Studies” 55:2 (1983), p. 158; Cf. J. Harris, *The senna: from description to literary theory*, “Michigan Germanic Studies” 5 (1979), p. 67; C.J. Clover, *Hábarðsljóð as Generic Farce*, “Scandinavian Studies” 51 (1979), pp. 139–140; and *The Germanic Context of the Unferþ Episode*, “Speculum” 55 (1980), p. 455; A. Heusler, *Die altgermanische Dichtung*, Postdam 1941, p. 105–108; J. de Vries, *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte*, Berlin 1964, p. 56–58.

<sup>31</sup> M. Bax, T. Padmos, *Two types of verbal dueling...*, p. 153, ref.18.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 159.

<sup>33</sup> M.E. Kalinke, *Sigurðar saga Jörðsalafara: the fictionalization of fact in Morkinskinna*, “Scandinavian Studies” 56:2 (1984), p. 162.

<sup>34</sup> C. Clover, *Unferþ Episode...*, p. 455.

The structure of *mannjafnaðr* in *Heimskringla* depends on verbal duelling in which two kings say that the other is better. This claim is rejected by a denial of the propositional content. “Rejection of a claim is also realized by declaring the fact which was boasted about irrelevant. This strategy of putting off (that does not affect the content of the foregoing claim as such) is, for example, used by Sigurdr who says, after Eysteinn has claimed to be the better skater of two. [...] *Magnússon saga* exposes another option: a simple rejection of the foregoing claim ... rejection not followed by a counterclaim is an appropriate move in the game”<sup>35</sup>. Bax and Padmos in their conclusion try to generalize what *mannjafnaðr* is. They explain what the rules of this event and these actions are. They write that:

“(A) claim in this type of verbal duel is made by reference to a special event in the personal history of the speaker; as regards the nature of these mentionable events, we saw that warlike spirit, virility, physical abilities, verbal abilities, and magic cunning are relevant issues in the course of Halfs saga. *mannjafnaðr*. In the context of this verbal duel, such a claim by the speaker is heard as an abuse, an attempt to reduce the prestige of the hearer. This pragmatistical meaning is either covert or overt. The obligatory response following this dominance proclaiming action is either a rejection or a rejection delivered together with a counter-claim. The act of rejecting is realized by a denial, a reproach, a questioning, by putting off or, implicitly, by mirroring or exceeding”<sup>36</sup>.

The situation and its rules can be shown in a table which describes certain moves<sup>37</sup>

|       |       |                |                |                |
|-------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Turn: | 1     | 2              | 3              | 4              |
|       |       | counter-claim# |                |                |
|       |       | or             |                |                |
| Move: | claim | rejection      | rejection+     |                |
|       |       | or             | counter-claim# |                |
|       |       | rejection+     | rejection      | rejection+     |
|       |       | counter-claim  | or             | counter-claim# |
|       |       |                | rejection+     |                |
|       |       |                | counter-claim  |                |

The simpler way is shown by Karen Swenson:

Speaker A: “I did X better than you did”.

Speaker B: “Well, that may be true, but X is not important. I did Y better than you did”<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, pp. 168–169.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 169.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 170.

<sup>38</sup> Swenson, *Performing Definitions...*, p. 116.

The case of *mannjafnaðr* in *Heimskringla* shows its regular structures. In other examples the regularity is not so obvious and differs a little bit. Karen Swenson interprets the episode in *Morkinskinna* as very exciting because of the fact that opponents are “at least superficially equal”<sup>39</sup>. She notices in regard to the end of a story that “After this comparison, we are told that the brothers are very angry with each other. Because the audience must expect that this *mannjafnaðr* will end in the customary way, we are told that, in fact, it does not”<sup>40</sup>. Lars Lönnroth noticed that the way of doing a *mannjafnaðr* presentation is characterized by how it allows the audience to witness the alternation between parties. And the switching between the present tense and the past tense is a stylistic feature which “serves to obliterate boundary between the audience and the story”<sup>41</sup>.

“The form, rhetoric, and opposition of the Magnússona saga flyting is strictly conventional (particularly in its pre-Snorri form). Only the bias is uncharacteristic, but this is of course a deliberate reversal: Eysteinn’s particular success lies in having upended the traditional terms. Travel and adventure are otherwise unanimously favored over domestic pastimes”<sup>42</sup>.

King Eysteinn, already in *Heimskringla* characterized as “very clever” and “the happiest and most humble among men” (it is worth to note, that describing him as “humble”, *litillar*, the author of a saga was aware that this word is not a part of the normal saga code, but is a part of the Christian and courtly literature!), while drinking at some point states that he and Sigurðr shall set off any ölskämt (beer joke/beer entertainment). King Sigurðr, who earlier in the saga was described as “usually not very amiable”, now turns out to live up to this characteristic by the brusque tone with which he declines. This legitimizes young Eysteinn’s next move, which is to suggest making a comparison of them two. King Sigurðr continues to remain silent, which is the signal to King Eysteinn to open the game. Preludes are thereby quickly passed over and the game can begin. King Eysteinn’s first gambit in the *mannjafnaðr* is still completely free from aggression or self-assertion. He claims only that the story itself has already provided evidence that the two kings have equal rank and dignity. But thus he provokes Sigurðr to the first “real” *manjafnaðr* reply, to the effect that he has held the title in wrestling. From here the game gradually moves on its own, and it is Sigurðr who leads the attacks in comparison. Consistently in all rounds, Sigurðr claims to possess the superior virtue of greater boldness, physical strength and aggression – i.e. the traditional virtues which comparison of men is focused on. On the other hand Eysteinn bases his claim on peaceful and courtly virtues based on courtesy.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>41</sup> Lönnroth, *En kunglig kontrovers...*, p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> Clover, *Unferþ Episode...*, p. 456.

There are thus two different manly ideals confronted, and the narrator presents them as two alternatives. Nonetheless, Eysteinn stands as the superior, because he manages to parry each of Sigurðr's attacks which has the effect of turning his ag-gressiveness to their advantage. The last round will be the crucial. Since Eysteinn also has the last word, he wins the competition, even if it is not explicitly stated. The Eystein parry is effective because it emphasizes his superiority in swimming and skating – two branches that are more skillful and together outweigh Sigurðr's previously mentioned skill in wrestling. Swimming was a brutal sport that was highly popular among the Scandinavians.

In the 3rd round Sigurðr makes claim to be skilled in archery and accuses Eysteinn of not even being able to tighten his bow, again an implicit accusation of being unmanly (cf. Odysseus and the suitors). To fully understand Eysteinn's reply it should be made clear that archery, especially at this time, was practiced in combination with skiing, and connected with winter hunting. Eysteinn's reply, that he aims as good as Sigurðr and he skis better, means that Sigurðr's claim to superiority in this branch has been reduced to superiority in an insignificant detail, drawing his bowstring, where he again is able to use his brute strength. Eysteinn stands out, however, in being the general "supreme" winter hunter. The last three rounds treat the theme of journey abroad versus staying at home, a traditional *manjamningar* theme that is here, however, varied in a new way. This final part of the strife of words concentrate first on Sigurd's departure from Norway, then at his performances abroad, finally at his homecoming – thus a strictly symmetrical progression. Eysteinn stayed at home and took care of and developed the country which in his mind is better than leaving the country for the sake of fighting for Christendom far away from homelands. But in the eyes of Marianne Kalinke travels of king Sigurð are not all negative. She interprets his behaviour as "pan-European" struggle of all Christianity in the times of Crusades<sup>43</sup>.

Scholars have argued over the relative merits of the *Morkinskinna* and *Heimskringla* versions of the verbal duel. *Heimskringla* exhibits a strict paral-lelism and progression. The characters answer each other in an exaggerated way and Snorri has them abide by the rules of the game. In *Morkinskinna* the game is constructed on the principle of contrast, however, and, as Kválen has rightly observed, the *mannjafnaðr* is a literary characterization and criticism constructed on everything that has preceded<sup>44</sup>. The antithetical and dissimilar character of the repartees reflects the antithetical and dissimilar personalities of the speak-ers. In this one dramatic incident the anonymous author of the *mannjafnaðr* in *Morkinskinna* has enunciated what he perceived to be the brothers' disparate but complementary personalities and accomplishments<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>43</sup> Kalinke, *Sigurdar...*, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Eivind Kválen, *Tillhøvet millom Morkinskinna, Fagrskinna, Ágrip og Orkneyinga saga*, "Edda" 24 (1926), p. 311.

<sup>45</sup> Kalinke, *Sigurdar...*, p. 165.

After all one may observe three stages of *mannjafnaðr*:

1. Words;
2. Two people in the game/sport competition;
3. Battle.

Firstly, the words are seen in the fragment we used in the analysis. There, the comparison of men has no physical impact but in a way it is more accurate. The words pretend a real fight and when somebody is using words in front of the audience people believe in them and in a way make them stronger, because words are travelling fast and news could spread among many persons. On this level of competition there was a matter of previous deeds of men who were compared with themselves and spreading of it throughout audience and further.

The second stage of *mannjafnaðr* appears in the games. Two men compete with each other to decide who is stronger and who is better in skills (games). Here we see the physical aspect of comparison of men but, again, it is a way to prevent violence and the actions only pretend to be war-like. Here the competition was based on actual events and there was no connection with earlier actions of protagonists.

The last stage is the time of no return. It is a battle game which is taken seriously. The battle had also different meanings than previous stages. It was not the matter of being better in front of the people who watched it. Here no one watched the battle for pleasure, unless it was the duel where two men stayed in the *hólm-ganguhring*<sup>46</sup>. The goal of *mannjafnaðr* was to compare two men with each other but at all cost do not allow them to reach the third stage where blood comes out.

## Conclusion

Why are the examples of *mannfræði* and *mannjafnaðr* discussed above only about men? At the end of this essay we have to consider the role of women in games. As far as I am aware, after examining all the instances concerning games in saga literature, women are not playing (probably were not allowed) any “masculine” games like *glima* (wrestling), *knattleikr* (ball game) and many other games which required strength.

One may assume it was due to the violence inherent in such events. Female saga protagonists were aware of such dangers, as *Njáls saga* makes clear when Hildigunnr is talking to her brothers about horse-fights<sup>47</sup>. On the other hand, in *Vatnsdæla* saga we read that women were looking at the *knattleikr*<sup>48</sup> and in *Sturlu saga* there is evidence that women attended rather than participated in the

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<sup>46</sup> See, Bø, *Hólmganga and Einvigi...*, pp. 132–114.

<sup>47</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 148.

<sup>48</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinnson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII, Reykjavík 1939, p. 98.

horse-fights<sup>49</sup>. The argument of fearing violence, in my opinion, is doubtful. But one may see many examples when women are playing board games. Also here a problem arises because almost every such occasion involves one woman playing with one man. Jenny Jochens notes that only supernatural women played together in groups, not ordinary women<sup>50</sup>. The explanation for that is unclear and we do not know if it was a custom. More likely, women played against each other without any reasons. The same was with drinking, women drank together with men but did not join drinking games because it insulted them. The example is seen in *Vøðu-brands þáttur*, where one may read about inventing of *Syrpuping*<sup>51</sup>. This kind of a game (law from Syrpa's thing) with a word *syrpa* (dirty woman) is suggested by Jochens to be a game of insulting women (in a sexual matter)<sup>52</sup>. On the other hand, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir shows the example of *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* in which she tries to see womanly *íþróttir*. She writes that “embroidery cannot be seen as the female equivalent of male *íþróttir*, but some women in the *fornaldar-* and *riddarasögur* arguably possess skills that could be regarded as *íþróttir* in the specific denotation... These include higher learning, playing chess, oratory, knowledge of runes, and medical skills”<sup>53</sup>. Those skills have not much to do with jarl Røgnvald's list of skills, which he listed in his poem in *Orkneyinga saga* and are considered as an example of the meaning of the word *íþróttir*<sup>54</sup>.

The idea of another character or the hero being presented by himself as a great man skilled in physical feats is all the time presented in the sources. This goes with the claims of society of having heroes and being heroes during the lifetime. As it was shown in the examples, this is done by showing superiority of a man among others. Not without significance is a question always repeated in the narration while coming to games: *hver er sterkastr?* Who is the strongest?

Both *mannfræði* and *mannjafnaðr* shows to what great degree games and sports were important for Icelandic saga authors and their audiences. Society needed strong characters skilled in many *íþróttir*, not only to identify with them but also to regard them as heroes. The masculinity of physical strength was also

<sup>49</sup> *Sturlu saga*, [in:] *Sturlunga saga*, Vol. 1, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbogason, Kristján Eldjárn, Reykjavík 1946, p. 101.

<sup>50</sup> J. Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, Cornell 1995, p. 104.

<sup>51</sup> *Vøðu-brands þáttur*, ed. by Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslensk Fornrit X*, Reykjavík 1956, p. 129.

<sup>52</sup> J. Jochens, *Women...*, p. 111.

<sup>53</sup> Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature. Bodies, Words, and Power*, Palgrave 2013, pp. 30–31.

<sup>54</sup> *Orkneyinga saga* mentions his poem: *Tafl emk orr at efla; íþróttir kannk níu; týnik trauðla rúnnum; tíðs mér bók ok smíðir. Skriða kannk á skiðum; skýtk ok roek, svát nýtir; hvártveggja kannk hyggja; harpslót ok bragþóttu*, [in:] *Lausavísur*, ed. by J. Jesch, [in:] *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*, Vol. II, *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 2: from c. 1035 to c. 1300*, ed. by K.E. Gade, Turnhout 2009, pp. 297–578.



used by saga authors not only in describing characters as sportsmen but also in the motif of character comparisons. As the above discussion shows, games and sports played significant role in medieval Iceland.

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## **MANNFROEDI I MANNJAFNAÐR I ICH ZWIĄZEK Z GRAMI**

### Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wpływ gier i aktywności fizycznej na sposób przedstawienia postaci w sagach islandzkich, który określa się mianem *mannfræði*. W sagach idealnego człowieka prawie zawsze przedstawiało się jako mistrza w różnego rodzaju grach i próbach sił. Jest to wyraz maskulinizacji kultury islandzkiej, która weszła również w sferę sag. Podobnie rzecz się ma z kolejnym zjawiskiem opisanym w artykule – *mannjafnaðr*. To z kolei jest niemal rytualnym porównywaniem się dwóch równych sobie osób, mającym na celu zdyskredytowanie przeciwnika. W słynnym *mannjafnaðr* dwóch królów, braci, główną płaszczyznę porównania stanowią właśnie sporty.