

Diction in the Description of Dragons in Icelandic Texts from c. 871-1600

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

University of Manitoba

In partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Icelandic Language and Literature

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the physical appearance of dragons as they appear in medieval Icelandic texts. I collected examples of descriptive diction from Icelandic texts to construct a pool of possible dragon descriptors. This pool, along with contemporaneous art, allowed me to construct a timeline of features that helped me evaluate common descriptions and to determine which terms correlated with others. The variety of terms collected present the Icelandic dragon as a chimeric entity, a being comprised from the anatomy of various creatures, including worms and serpents, fish and whales, as well as birds. When these features are consolidated, the Icelandic dragon as a whole functions as a symbol of domination that arises from a powerful and synergistic array of donor animals. Overall, this thesis shows that some previous translations and interpretations of the features of Icelandic dragons were misleading or incomplete. Correcting these translations and interpretations will not only help us to see the Icelandic dragon more clearly but will also help correct our understanding of their place in the global taxonomy of dragons.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Birna Bjarnadóttir for accepting me into the program, as well as her oversight before transferring responsibility to Dr. David Watt, who was instrumental to this thesis seeing the light of day. The insights Peter John Buchan provided as to the nuances of Icelandic language cannot be overstated.

A debt of gratitude is owed to those who have helped me study and research the material in Iceland. Your insights and perspectives, as well as your knowledge of the material, proved crucial in pulling everything together. Thank you Dr. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, Dr. Ármann Jakobsson, Dr. Terry Gunnell, and Dr. Arngrímur Vídalín, for your guidance and help while studying in Iceland.

I would also like to thank the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies for the wonderful manuscript images as well as their assistance in finding them.

I am grateful to the Edna and Carl Bjarnason Bursary, Olson/Jonsson Travel Scholarship, Thorsteinn J. Gislason Memorial Scholarship, and the Konrad Gordon Sigurdson Graduate Award for financial assistance. Iceland can be an expensive place to conduct research when you live a quarter of the globe away.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and my friends for putting up with my ramblings of imaginative beings. Your support and encouragement through the years of this degree were instrumental. This would not have been possible if it were not for you.

Thank you all,

Ryan Stewart

Dedications

For Kim Marshall, whose love and zeal for teaching remains a constant source of comfort, and inspiration to do things the right way, and not the easy way.

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1. Introduction

I became inspired to write this thesis when I noticed a discrepancy between an Icelandic version of *Völuspá* and the English translation. I had been looking to build a catalogue of reference terms used in Icelandic folktales and mythology, when I noticed that a section in *Völuspá* used “fjöðrum” to describe the physical appearance of the dragon Níðhoggr, whereas the English translation used “wings” (*Völuspá, Hauksbók* 21r, Larrington 13 stanza 66). “Fjöðrum” (fjaðrir nom. sing.) literally means feathers, so the use of “wings” in the English translation needed some explanation. This discrepancy between an Old Norse text and its modern English translation led me to reexamine my assumptions about the appearance of the Icelandic dragon, and I began searching for other ways that the features of Icelandic dragons are represented.

This thesis is an examination of the descriptive terms used in reference to dragons in Icelandic literature from about 871 to 1600 AD. The primary purpose is to resolve the apparent contradiction about the wings of Icelandic dragons, search for other inconsistencies, and examine the nuances of Icelandic terms. Contemporaneous art was used as supplementary information when it could help shed light on the Icelandic terms used to describe dragons in the period under consideration.

The spectrum of dragons that emerged from the texts showed that there is more to the Icelandic dragon than a single archetype. This diversity challenged assumptions of language and translation. For example, two distinct terms are used in Icelandic texts to

refer to dragons but English translations used “dragon” as the equivalent term for both. The word “dragon” is used in English for a range of concepts as “dreki” is used in modern Icelandic. However, the creatures presented in these Icelandic texts are not well defined, and it is not always simple to define a dragon by virtue of what noun is used. Therefore any creature that could reasonably be translated into English as “dragon” was examined. Medieval Icelandic literature, manuscript illustrations, and art show important anatomical and physiological differences among the Icelandic dragons.

I created a timeline of characteristics associated with Icelandic dragons by returning to Icelandic sources. There was no reason to assume that the physical appearances of dragons remained constant through the period of investigation, so I used these sources to create a chronology of the terms used to describe Icelandic dragons. The manuscripts, texts, sculptures, and art that I examine in this thesis demonstrate that there is a spectrum of dragons in this period.

Whereas Chapter 2 of this thesis examines the components that make up Icelandic dragons, Chapter 3 considers the dragon as a whole and suggests that it may be understood as a cultural symbol of power and domination through its combined elements. The thesis concludes that the place of Icelandic dragons in global dragon taxonomies hinges on an erroneous translation and should be revisited.

Defining the Dragon

The term “dragon” can conjure a broad range of mental images. I therefore begin by defining the term as I use it in this thesis. Although this may seem a simple task, the particular process of definition is complicated by the widespread existence of the fictitious and mythical dragon. According to David Pickering, a dragon is “a large scaly fire-breathing monster with a long forked tail and sometimes wings” (Pickering 84). Pickering then expands this definition: “many dragons are more accurately described as water serpents, haunting certain lakes and pools” (Pickering 84). His definition of a dragon will be shown not to be particularly applicable to Icelandic dragons, but it provides a good place to start because it alerts us to the various issues that need to be discussed in order to define what we mean when we use the word “dragon.”

The dragons that appear in Icelandic sagas, folklore, and Norse mythology as well as Icelandic art and sculpture do not always follow Pickering’s model. They not only possess different features than the dragons Pickering describes but also frequently differ from one another. Robert Blust writes in “The Origin of Dragons” that: “Summary treatments of the [dragon] often portray it as an enormous snake with no further qualification, but a closer look at the evidence usually reveals a physically more complex mythical being” (Blust 528). Blust expands on this idea further:

[As] is commonly recognized, the dragon is basically a snake. Its scales thus follow from its ophidian heritage, but those physical attributes which make it chimerical appear to have disparate origins and unequal geographical

distributions: horns are a very widespread feature, hair appears to be somewhat less common, and feathers evidently are confined to the dragons of an area stretching from northern California to Mesoamerica although wings are more widespread (Blust 528).

To Blust, dragons are essentially chimeras. Originally found in Greek mythology, the chimera was a ferocious beast that was comprised of three parts, a lion, a goat, and a snake (Bartlett 281). Today, however, the term is frequently used for living entities that are composed from multiple other beings: Pegasus is one such creature; the griffin is another. In genetics, for example, it is used to describe a creature born from multiple donor zygotes, though it is also used as a general term outside of genetics (Sherrington 767).¹ In relation to dragons, however, “chimerical” means that they are comprised of elements from different creatures, as is the original chimera. Sometimes there are many donor animals, sometimes just a few, but the end result is a hybrid being that is more than the sum of its parts. Because they are chimerical, dragons cannot be defined by the added features that Blust touches upon. The presence of scales, wings, or horns is neither sufficient nor necessary for the identification of a dragon.

The definition of dragons is complicated by the fact that their features vary from culture to culture, and carry different connotations in each culture. Norse mythology holds dragons to be reclusive beings, or timeless creatures that can survive through the end of worlds, as did Níðhoggr (Larrington 13). Chinese and Japanese dragons are

¹ Starting on page 767 Sherrington discusses the use of “chimera” as part of genetic terminology, as well as discussing the science behind it.

commonly described or portrayed with long whisker-like protrusions around their mouths, similar to a catfish's barbels, and stags' antlers. The color of the Chinese dragons' hide or scales is an important physical feature that connects the dragon back to cultural ideas: yellow for the emperor, white for the moon, or red for the pursuit of science (Cirlot 88). Chinese lore posits that the dragon is a divine being, associated with the divinity of the emperor (Cirlot 88). Mayan and Aztec mythology says that Quetzalcoatl, a wind god, is a feathered and serpent-styled dragon (Bartlett 258). European dragons of the Middle Ages "make their appearance with the throat and legs of an eagle, the body of a huge serpent, the wings of a bat and with a tail cumulating in an arrow twisted back upon itself" (Cirlot 88). Despite being spread across the globe, each of these cultures has a creature that is comprised of a number of different features. We could describe these creatures as chimerical, but the word "dragon" is used in English to depict them even though they vary quite substantially from one culture to the next.

The globally shared label of "dragon" is important because its universality leaves us content to say the examples are all dragons without taking the time to define what a dragon is. Because the pan-cultural occurrence of dragons is overlaid by local or regional specifics, there is not one stringent definition of dragons. All of the examples of dragons discussed in the thesis essentially describe a snake dressed with the trappings of other animals.

The idea that the word dragon can refer to creatures that vary substantially in terms of their physical attributes and abilities is apparent in an example from

contemporary popular culture. The animated film *How to Train Your Dragon* and its sequels present a world similar to ours but filled with dragons. The setting of these films provides a reasonable example of how the term “dragon” relates to the large variety of descriptions and appearances of dragons.² Each type of dragon seen in the film has its own set abilities and traits, which have been observed and recorded by the humans. In one scene, a dragon-slayer in training recites known information about dragons, revealing there is a classification system of sorts and that each type (though species or breed may be a better term) of dragon has been rated on the intensity of its fire breath, the number of times it can breathe in a period, and its overall danger level (Deblois and Sanders). This system of assessment and categorization is reinforced with the appearance of a dragon encyclopedia that contains entries for each dragon. These entries describe habits, appearances and basic anatomy in the case of oddities like multi-headed dragons. Additionally, information concerning the abilities of the dragon, rather than its physical appearance, is included, such as whether the dragon breathes a plume of fire or a ball of sticky, napalm-like substance. What does not appear in the film is a debate about which dragon is more of a dragon than the others. There are no questions about any one type of dragon being a better example of dragon-kind than others. The dragons shown in the film may or may not have scales or wings, they may be large or small, and they generally do not conform to any sort of classification system that could be utilized outside the fictional setting. Clearly the term “dragon” is being used as an overarching name for a variety of

² The movies appear to only have four categories of creatures; humans, dragons, sheep, and fish. The latter two are often seen being consumed by the first two, though the plot allows that dragons may consume humans.

creatures, and it carries little to no inherent descriptive value in this context. These dragons are being ranked and assessed on their features and abilities, rather than how well they match a specific definition of dragon.

Consider how we categorize non-fictional animals in our daily lives as an example, specifically in regards to how we group similar animals in taxonomy. Creatures are categorized based on what kind of features or anatomy it has, as is the case in *How to Train Your Dragon*; however, the purpose of this categorization is not to determine a hierarchy among dragons with different features. If we were discussing mammals it would not be sensible to argue that the platypus is a superior specimen of mammal when compared to the elephant, or that there is a hierarchy of “mammal-ness” in the mammalian class. The basic definition of mammals is that they possess mammary glands to feed offspring, hence the name of the class: Mammalia. The fact that the platypus lays eggs, a rare occurrence among mammals, does not negate its inclusion in Mammalia. Dragons should not be treated as though they are each part of the same species (like elephants), but rather as a taxonomic class (like Mammalia). This means that some of the best known examples of dragons, such as the dragon of *Beowulf*, Fáfnir, or Smaug, do not define what is carried by the term “dragon”: they are just examples of the term. Not ranking one specimen over another is critical when looking at historical dragons. One dragon should not be used as the standard against which all others should be judged.

This great diversity of dragons stems from the diversity of options that can be added to the basic model. These options are drawn from a pool of possible features. Accepting

Blust's premise that a dragon is a snake with extra parts, there is a minimum number of features or descriptors that allows the term "dragon" to be applied to the entity in question. Not all possible descriptors or features will be used at the same time, but when enough of these descriptors are present we can apply the term "dragon" to the being under consideration. This allows a variety or spectrum of examples to exist without imposing more or less weight to any singular type or example. I have created and adopted the following definition of a dragon for this thesis:

A dragon is a supernatural creature that physically possesses a serpentine chassis though it may have different features and abilities in addition to this chassis.

Assessing the appearance of medieval Icelandic dragons requires examples from throughout the period, each reflecting different values and ideas about the dragon. This definition provides the minimum requirement, such as hair and mammary glands for Mammalia, but does not tack on additional requirements that would start measuring dragons against each other. It also allows creatures to be included regardless of what term or noun is used to refer to them, or whether or not they are called dragons explicitly.

It is important to allow for the possibility that a text is describing a dragon even when it does not use explicit terminology to name them. There are two nouns used for dragons in the Icelandic texts: "ormur" and "dreki." These two terms are both correctly translated to English as "dragon," but there are differences between them, much in the same way that there is a difference usage between "wings" and "feathers." These terms will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but will also appear throughout the thesis. In

addition to these nouns, dragons also possess formal names, such as Fáfnir, and are usually referred to by that name, while other dragons are nameless. I include them because without allowing dragons that lack these nouns or names, a large number of Icelandic dragons would be excluded from this study.

Understanding the Icelandic Dragon

The translator plays a large role in conveying to a new audience what is meant by the specific terms used in the descriptions of dragons in the original texts. The words chosen, or not chosen, by the translator change how the dragon is received or interpreted by the audience. This is true even for the medieval Icelandic authors: the terms chosen for dragons may appear to be synonymous but can possess subtle differences that have substantial ramifications. The words “ormur” and “dreki” in medieval Icelandic and Old Norse texts are normally understood to mean, and translated as, dragon in English. “Dreki” is still used for dragon in modern Icelandic while “ormur” is now normally translated into English as “earthworm.” These terms seem to have been more or less synonymous before the modern era.

Icelandic and Old Norse languages are considered very closely related, and only vary from each other in small grammar and spelling differences. Old English is also closely related to these languages, so the dragon that appears in the poem *Beowulf* provides a useful etymological comparison to help us understand that a variety of terms could be used interchangeably in Icelandic texts. The sole surviving manuscript of

Beowulf is dated to circa 1000, and is contemporary to the period being examined.³ The dragon is referred to as “dragon,” “serpent,” and “worm,” and frequently in close proximity to a different term, occasionally in the same sentences.

Pā se *wurm* onwōc, wrōht wæs genīwad;

stonc ðā æfter stāne, stearc-heort onfand fōt-lāst;

hē tō forð gestōp dyrnan cræfte, *dracan* hēafde nēah. (Wrenn 2287-2290)

[When the *dragon* stirred, strife was renewed;

he slithered along the stones, stark-heated he found his enemy’s footprint -

he had stepped too far in his stealthy skill, too close to the *serpent*’s head.]

(*Beowulf* 2287-2290)

Stīð-mōd gestōd wið stēapne rond winia bealdor, ðā se *wurm* gebēah snūde tōsomne. (Wrenn 2566-2569)

[He stood stouthearted behind his steep shield, that friend and commander, when the *worm* coiled itself swiftly together.] (*Beowulf* 2566-2568)

The Old English terms “Wurm” and “dracan” are both used in *Beowulf* to refer to the dragon, while in the translation “dragon,” “serpent,” and “worm” are used. In the case of

³ More can be read about the manuscript in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase, University of Toronto Press (1997).

the first example, the translations are interchangeable; “wurm” became “dragon,” and “dracan” became “serpent” (even though “dragon” would be the closer term). This particular translation suggests that each term is equal when referring to the creature in question.

This is not always the case: there is a fundamental difference between *Beowulf* which uses both “wurm” and “dracan” and Old Icelandic sources, which only use one term at one time. Specifically, only one dragon term is ever used in a text. If this rule was present in *Beowulf* either “dracan” or “wurm” would be used for the entire text, but never both. The introduction of Old English here is not an explanation of the history behind each term, but rather an example of the use of multiple terms on both sides of the translation equations. There are no such direct examples in Icelandic, because the two terms, “ormur” and “dreki,” do not appear together while referring to dragons.

The Age of Dragons

As previously mentioned, the starting point for this thesis was *Völuspá*, which is dated to approximately 1400. From this approximate date contemporaneous material was sought, but some definition of the era, which will be referred to hereafter as medieval Iceland, is required.

The settlement of Iceland by Norse settlers has been dated to 871, with a margin of error of two or three years, using volcanic ash trapped in glaciers (Vésteinsson 3).

Obviously, there cannot be any Icelandic material before this point, so the date of settlement is also used as the beginning of the period observed. However, for the material examined 871 is more an approximate starting point as some sources and materials are dated only to the 9th century but are included here to capture the beginning of Icelandic literature.

The end of the era is harder to pin down. Raedts refers to changes in four areas of a civilization as the basis for the end of an era in an argument regarding the European Middle Ages:

There have been several historians who have pointed out that most basic social, political, economical and religious structures, established in the twelfth century, did not change until the end of the eighteenth century. The sixteenth century may have been a period of quantitative growth but it cannot be considered as the beginning of a new era: in other words, the Middle Ages continued until about 1800. (Raedts 16)

While Raedts' focus is on the European Middle Ages, his benchmarks of changes in "social, political, economical and religious structures" can be seen in Iceland by 1600. The prime reason for this is the Icelandic Protestant Reformation, when Iceland went through a large religious transmutation, something mainland Scandinavia had undergone earlier. This reformation had political and cultural ramifications in Iceland and involved over two decades of conflict between Catholic and Protestant factions, culminating in

1550 with the execution of Jón Arason, the last Catholic bishop in Iceland, though various religious laws would be created in the decades to follow.

There are notable events that occur before the Icelandic Reformation, such as its conversion to Christianity (1000), Iceland's loss of independence to Denmark (1262), as well as the abandonment or loss of other associated colonies to the west (approximately 1300s) which would have economic effects on Iceland.⁴ Another change was the arrival of new technology, something Raedt does not include among his benchmarks, but could reasonably be included. Iceland got the printing press in 1530, just under a century after it was invented in Europe. These events led towards the end of the era in medieval Iceland, with the Reformation of Iceland being the last indicator.

It is worth clarifying that while the Reformation is identified as a period of social and cultural upheaval in Iceland, the population was not isolated up to that point. Contact with mainland Europe brought in foreign stories, beliefs, and concepts which would mingle with their domestic counterparts.⁵ The sagas, folktales, and art presented in this paper may have origins or counterparts outside of Iceland. However, it should be kept in mind that each item passed through the filter of Icelandic beliefs. The individual presenting the dragon, regardless of media, had the option to change that which they

⁴ Regarding loss of independence, Iceland joined Norway at this point, and would form a union with Denmark with the Kalmar Union.

⁵ There is archaeological evidence that Iceland was well connected during this period. For instance, Ramona Harrison, Howell M. Roberts, and W. Paul Adderley argue that evidence from a historical trading post indicates that there was a large volume of trade in and out of Iceland's northern shores. See "Gásir in Eyjafjörður: International Exchange and Local Economy in Medieval Iceland," *Journal of the North Atlantic* 1.1 (2008): 99-119.

thought did not fit their Icelandic perspective. Thus the material is Icelandic in authorship, if not origin. In regards to the art specifically, these pieces are being used primarily for the visual elements they contain, not necessarily the story or meaning they carry. Several Icelandic manuscript illuminations feature Christian imagery, or are indicative of a larger story, with a context that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. This thesis' focus remains on the physical appearance of the dragon rather than the cultural significance of it.

The sources are also geographically limited to Iceland. While Old Norse texts can be found elsewhere in Europe during this period, Iceland provides a useful way of limiting my study because it can be considered a discrete cultural and political entity in the medieval period and beyond. I consider Icelandic texts to offer an effective case study because they offer enough evidence about dragons to indicate a sense of the value of my approach without providing so much material that it would be overwhelming. I nonetheless believe that it would be reasonable to scale up this investigation by including a wider variety of sources, especially contemporaneous sources in mainland Europe.

Methods

Icelandic dragons that appear in literary sources provide the main focus regarding descriptors and traits discussed in this thesis. Dragons feature in the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda, as well as various heroic or legendary sagas, also known as fornaldarsögur. They are also present in other sagas and Icelandic folktales. The texts mentioned above

are the starting point for the thesis since they provide specific descriptive or anatomical terms for dragons.

The examination and analysis of these texts and their terms constituted the first stage of the thesis. Some texts have little to say about the dragon; these texts include dragons but do not describe them in much detail. Sources of this kind offer a limited window into the shape or physical capabilities of the dragon. The dragon in question may only be present in the text for a few sentences before the story carries on. Other texts are more expansive, and offer details about the physical appearance of the dragon.

Libraries, collections, catalogues, and searchable databases such as the University of Copenhagen's Dictionary of Old Norse Prose provide the literary foothold for this work. Through them it was possible to find a large number of Icelandic texts, ranging from prose to poetry, folktales to mythology, that contain dragons. I was able to search some databases electronically, but other sources had to be manually searched. In the case of manually searching, a list of potential works or sources was compiled beforehand from references, citations, and bibliographies.

Each source was then put through a two-step examination that was repeated for each text in the original language as well as the translated versions. The purpose was to search for any variation of translation, mistake, or hidden connotations that may be hard to carry from one language to another.

First, an assessment was made to determine if dragons were mentioned in the text. There are common words that are used for dragons and other objects. Dragon ships, the iconic Viking era sailing vessel, are common in sagas, and there is not always a clear differentiation between vessels and living creatures. The ships themselves are frequently referred to as dragons or “dreki” which is the most common term for dragons in medieval and contemporary Icelandic. For example, in a saga, an account of a sea battle may describe the attempt to capture one of the ships. Such assaults are frequently depicted as men making an attack on a dragon. This style of storytelling is rife throughout the sagas. An attack upon a man, a dragon, or a ship will all be told in the same style, making it crucial to find the context to be able to determine the nature of the dragon in question. This thesis is only concerned references to animate dragons.

The second step was an evaluation of the descriptive information presented about dragons. The target information was diction: nouns, adjectives, and other descriptive words. In the source texts, these were directly or indirectly given, depending on whether the information came from a narrator or from an individual’s account of a dragon. Not all sources were equal and some versions of sources were preferred over others. Some stories contain dragons but provided no qualitative information; these stories used nouns to indicate that a dragon was present, but offered no description of the dragon. These descriptor-less stories were noted to mark the existence of the dragon but not included further in the study because of their lack of information. The stories that described dragons were analyzed further in both Icelandic/Old Norse and English, to understand

what information their terms presented. That information and discussion was sorted into different topics based on features that were notable.

Determining whether a feature was “notable” or not was based on the texts themselves. As previously mentioned, a pool of possible dragon traits and features supplies descriptors by which a dragon can be identified. The pool of Icelandic terms or descriptors was built by finding terms that appeared frequently in the texts, or provided a clear idea of the physical appearance of the dragon in question.

After the literary work was analyzed, concomitant illustrations and art were sought for comparative purposes. These were examined to see if they either confirmed or contradicted the features described by the texts, as well as to expand the range of possible descriptions or presentations. Artwork ranged from carved wood doors to manuscript illustrations, and mirrored the range of historical dates of the texts themselves. Comparing and contrasting the information from the literary sources with the imagery presented by the art provided visual evidence for some translational interpretations. The art also clarified what the text was referring to in some cases, where the text was ambiguous. For manuscripts that contain dragon illuminations, the text and content of the manuscript were tracked as well. While certain features like claws, legs, and horns are depicted in the art shown here, these features are not discussed because the diction used to describe these features in the texts do not provide the kind of precise information conveyed by the terms that I do consider. Claws, legs, and horns are rarely described in any detail in the texts under my consideration, and the terms used to describe them in

Icelandic texts do not provide any additional details to our conception of these features.

Nonetheless, I will discuss some problematic descriptors later and in more detail.

Having mined the primary sources, I turned to secondary ones. There is very little academic material in this area of study. Two articles, both by Paul Acker, touch upon elements similar to those discussed in this thesis, but favor a larger breadth of material over focusing on Icelandic dragons. “Death by Dragons” provides a catalogue-like approach to deaths attributed to dragons in sagas, and while some descriptive terms appear they are frequently superficial ones (Acker, “Death” 2012). “Dragons in the Eddas and in Early Nordic Art” starts with a discussion about deriving details of dragon anatomy through secondary descriptors before concentrating on the exploration of dragons found on runestones (Acker, “Dragons” 2015). Neither article provided much information about the structure or appearance of Icelandic dragons. Other academics discuss the same sources I have used, but use them for discussions of feud, translation, or cultural inspection focused on Icelandic trolls.⁶ Academic discussions on the appearances of Icelandic dragons have been cited where relevant, though the lack of secondary sources has been a continuing impediment to research.

The last method of inspecting Icelandic dragons was to break each source’s dragons down into their basic traits, with the help of the pool of descriptors and traits, and then to sort sources based on time. This timeline uses sources that provide information about the dragon in the story, rather than all stories that merely contain the word

⁶ Finlay 1991, Gunnell and Annette 2013, and Straubhaar 2001.

“dragon” and it does not include sources that contain dragons if there are no descriptors of the dragon present. The resulting timeline was an attempt to examine dragon features, traits, and attributes presented in order of ascending time. Trends or patterns of traits might be revealed that would not be seen just by analyzing individual sources.

Not all descriptors found are listed in the timeline. This is because not all possible descriptors are equal in the information they provide. The problematic descriptors mentioned earlier are not included in the timeline because of this; descriptions of claws or feet, for example, are brief and vague at best in the rare cases they appear in the texts. Without the literary evidence, it is hard to identify any specific information.

The resulting timeline (Table 1) does not clearly reveal trends or evolution of dragon features in Iceland. This is partly due to the imprecision of dating some sources, such as the 400 year period attributed to Ragnarssaga; it is also due to the lack of clear and identifiable descriptors used in texts and contemporary art. The timeline does, however, highlight how some descriptors and traits were used.

One insight provided is the evidence of a subtle rule in literary works. Not all of the texts use a noun for a dragon, but when a text does, it uses one term, and one term only, in reference to the dragon. This may be in part due to the selective word choices available to Old Norse and Icelandic, that if a word is available for a specific feature it should be used over other less specific terms. For example, if a dragon is referred to as “ormur,” the word “dreki” will not appear in that work referring to the same creature. This rule will be discussed in greater detail later.

Related to this, we can see that there may have been great mutability to the dragon chassis, regardless of the term referring to the dragon, by the sporadic appearance of fire and poison, coils, or even whale or fish tails. These appearances do not seem to have a strong preference for either chassis term, even when the dragon is depicted as having coils.

Table 1. Timeline of 10 text and 15 art dragon sources. (T) and (A) are used to mark text sources and art sources respectively. X denotes that the trait or feature is present. Völuspá contains two separate dragons and the two denoted as X and Y.

Table 1.

Early Date	Later Date	Source	Nouns, Attributes, and Descriptors								
			(Flug)Dreki	Ormur	Fire	Poison	Wings	Feathers	Coils	Sporð	Fish
800	1200	Ragnarssaga (C13 account of C9 events) (T)		X					X		X
1015	1028	Bjarnar saga Hítœlakappa (T)	X				X			X	
1100	1199	Yngvars saga víðförla (T)	X				X				
1200	1200	Valþjófsstaður Door (A)					X	X			
1200	1200	Völsunga saga (T)	X			X					
1200	1200	Ketilssaga (T)	X		X		X		X		X
1300	1399	GKS04-3269a-is0015v (Lögþók: discussions of Jónsbók, parliament, copy of Jónsbók) (A)					X	X			
1300	1499	Sörla saga sterka (T)	X			X					
1300	1300	AM02-0133-is-0014v (Njal's Saga) (A)					X	X	X		
1340	1360	GKS04-3270-is-0026r (Lög: Kristinréttur Árna biskups, Bíblían, Jónsbók) (A)					X	X			
1345	1580	Lagarfljótsormurinn (T)		X		X					
1390	1410	Gull-Þoris saga (T)	X		X	X	X				
1393	1393	AM02-0350-is-0019r (Lög, Kristinréttur Árna biskups) (A)			X		X	X			
1400	1400	Völuspá (T)		X		X	Y	Y			
1400	1610	AM_147_4to,_0027r_-_52, (Jónsbók) (A)					X	X			
1440	1460	AM_132_4to,_0011v_-_25 (Jónsbók) (A)					X	X		X	X
1440	1460	AM_132_4to,_0046v_-_95 (Jónsbók) (A)					X	X	X		
1450	1475	AM 673a III 4to 008v, (Teiknibókin) (A)					X	X	X		
1450	1475	AM 673a III 4to 007r (Teiknibókin) (A)					X	X			
1450	1499	Hálfánar saga Eysteinssonar (T)	X			X				X	
1460	1460	AM_157_a_4to_62r (Stóridómur, Jónsbók, Réttarbætur og lagaförmlar) (A)					X	X	X		
1490	1510	AM 140 4to 04v (Samtínigur: Meditationes piissimæ de cognitione humanæ conditionis) (A)					X	X			
1540	1560	AM04-0604F-IS0008V (Rímnabók) (A)					X	X			
1540	1560	AM160 4TO (Jónsbók, Kristinréttur Árna biskups, Kirkjuskipanir, lagaákvæði og samþykktir) (A)		X							
1598	1598	Drinking Horn (A)					X	X			

2. Physical Descriptions of Dragons

Although the descriptions of dragons are limited in medieval Icelandic texts, the features described vary drastically. Some dragons are more biologically complex than others: they possess more traits, and occasionally more appendages or extremities, than other dragons do. Wings, fish and whale tails, and worm bodies all make an appearance, though not necessarily simultaneously. The following sections explore the diction—the nouns, adjectives, and other descriptors—used to describe dragons in Icelandic texts. These are primarily associated with worms and serpents, fish and whales, and birds, though other descriptors will be discussed as well. Visual works are also used to demonstrate that examining the precise Icelandic diction for specialized terminology is reasonable.

It should be noted that folktales, sagas, and mythos rarely go into descriptive details unless the specifics are critical to the story's progression, or if the description shows a unique trait or feature. This stylistic feature limits the number of useful descriptions of dragons in my sources. There are few dragons that are named specifically in Icelandic folk stories, but references within the Poetic Edda suggest that hundreds or thousands of dragons exist within the Norse mythology. Odin says that “more serpents lie under Yggdrasil than any fool can imagine” and a small number of dragons are named in *Grimnir's Sayings* (Larrington 1996 Pg 47). Among the lists of names in the Poetic Edda is a list of dragons. Just as there is scant information about the names listed in the Edda, the few descriptions of dragons given in the list tend to be almost secondary, a byproduct

of the story being told. In Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa we see an example of this brevity: “Björn grabbed the tail of the dragon and with his other hewed at the wing and it was broken, the dragon falling down dead” (Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa). “Síðan grípur Björn í sporðinn drekans annarri hendi en annarri hjó hann fyrir aftan vængina og gekk þar í sundur og féll drekinn niður dauður” in the original Icelandic (Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa). This style, while a frustrating challenge for anyone trying to analyze the physical attributes of dragons, does nonetheless yield some specific examples of dragon morphology and anatomy when they are important to the story. In this example, the dragon is winged and also possesses a tail. I will discuss both of these features later in this chapter.

Contrasting this manner are overview descriptions of the dragons, usually used by the storyteller to create a sense of awe or dread regarding the dragon. In these instances, the audience is given a larger description of the monster, though this description lacks the details that the implicit style provides. An example of this type of overall descriptor is found in Ketils saga:

However, he had not gone very far from inhabited areas when he saw a single *dragon* fly out of a hill to the north. It had writhing coils and a tail like a *serpent*, but wings like a *dragon*. Fire angrily burned out of its eyes and mouth. (Chappell; emphasis added)

En er hann var kominn eigi allskammt í burt frá bænum, sér hann *dreka* einn fljúga að sér norðan úr björgunum. Hann hafði lykkju og sporð sem *ormur*, en vængi sem

dreki. Eldur þótti honum brenda úr augum hans og gini. (Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa; emphasis added)

The only descriptors of this dragon are its coils, tail, wings, as well as limited facial features and fire. However, we do not know if it had scales, legs, neck, or even a defined head, though those features could easily be assumed. Dragons' physical features are rarely discussed. Through both explicit and implicit descriptions we can see elements of what a dragon should look like, or at least what the author thought they should look like.

Worms and Serpents

The dragons I discuss in this section are not complex beings in terms of their anatomical construction. They are regularly depicted as having a long and coiling snake- or worm-like body, which are their most defining features. For the most part these dragons lack any secondary descriptors of scales and skin on their bodies. However, they are occasionally paired with other descriptors that will be discussed in later sections. The worm or serpent chassis that is prevalent here forms the basis of those dragons.

Earlier the terms “ormur” and “dreki” were introduced. They are the two terms used in medieval Iceland for dragons. The English translation of these terms would typically be “worm” and “dragon,” especially in modern translations, though “ormur” was also used historically for serpents or snakes. This contrasts with the modern use of the word, which is accurately translated into English as “worm” or “earthworm.” Historically, the two terms were in use at the same period, as tracked by the timeline. The concurrent use

of these terms suggests that one word did not replace the other to describe the same entity, at least during the medieval period. It is important to remember that the term “ormur,” which was commonly used until roughly 1345, is not used to identify a creature in any text where the word “dreki” is. Given that “ormur” is not the modern Icelandic term for dragons, the term is a good starting point for examining dragons, especially since these dragons provide the groundwork for understanding later dragons that are more anatomically complex. The Old Icelandic definition for “ormur” is:

Ormr. m. [Ulf. *waurms* = ὄφις; A. S. *wyrm*; Engl. *Worm*...]: *a snake, serpent*, also including , (cp. *maðkr*), and even dragons ...*högg-ormr, a viper;...Serpents brooded over gold and treasures, cp. the serpent Fáfnir ... whence in poetry gold is called ... the bank, bed, abode, garden, land, litter, earth, etc. of snakes.* (Cleasby-Vigfusson Dictionary "O")

This definition shows that the term can be used for snakes, worms, and dragons. It may not always be clear which creature is meant, though. An example of this usage of “ormur” can be seen in Völuspá. “Ormur” is used when a hall is described being made of woven serpent vertebrae in the last line of this passage:

Sal sá hon standa

sólu fjarri

Náströndu á,

norðr horfa dyrr;

falla eitrdropar

inn um ljóra,

sá er undinn salr

orma hryggjum. (Völuspá; emphasis added)

[A hall she saw standing far from the sun,

on Corpse-Strand, its doors look north,

drops of poison fall in through the roof-vents,

the hall is woven of *serpents'* spines]. (Larrington stanza 38; emphasis added)

Since arthropods lack an endo-skeletal structure, the word “ormur” clearly cannot refer to them here. It is not clear in this example whether the spines belonged to snakes or dragons, but either creature could be conveyed by the term “ormur.”

As indicated in the earlier discussion of *Beowulf*, “ormur” is also similar to the Old English term “wurm,” which was used to refer to serpentine creatures (OED, s.v. “wurm”).⁷ The term continued to hold these connotations in Middle English (ca. 1100-1500). The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the “wurm,” and its various spellings, as:

(a) A dragon or dragonlike creature;

⁷ Also seen in *Beowulf* earlier.

- (b) a serpent, snake; also *fig.*; also, a sacred serpent serving as an object of cult worship, a temple snake [1st quot.]; one of the serpents of Greek or Roman mythology;
- (c) the serpent in the Garden of Eden;
- (d) a figural or sculptural representation of a serpent; also, a serpent costume or prop;
- (e) as a name for Satan; also, as a name for a demon [1st quot.].

(*MED*, s.v. “wurm”)

The entry makes it clear that the Middle English term definitely included dragons, and that this may have been a primary meaning. The last meaning, that it could be used as a name for Satan, or a demon, does not seem to fit with the other four definitions, but I will return to an example later that portrays a dragon in this capacity.

This use of a snake-dragon can be compared to one from Icelandic folklore. The worm of Lagarfljót, as it is called in English, is said to live in the waters of the Lagarfljót lake, and combines the features of a snake with the scale of a dragon. The synopsis of the origin story is that the dragon was originally a snake but grew large and fearsome because of the presence of gold.⁸ After both the snake and the gold were tossed into the river the story continues:

A long time passed and people in the area began to notice that a large serpent was living in their lake. It was killing men and animals whenever they tried to cross over the water. Sometimes, it would crawl onto the shore and spew a horrid

⁸ Some versions of the story say worm or lindworm, some use snake or serpent.

poison. The serpent was causing a great deal of trouble and no one knew how to get rid of it. (Bedell 181)

Later, the dragon was bound underneath the water, all along the fjord, by the traveling priests (Simpson 117).

The descriptions of Lagarfljótsormurinn are sparse. We are told that this dragon has a venomous maw and considerable girth and length. The description of this dragon's size is unusual. In general, the size of dragons is not specified. We can often infer that a dragon is "large" from narrative clues, but the use of this terminology often introduces problems. For example, if a text describes a dragon as being large, it could be an indication that this dragon is either large compared to other creatures or compared to other dragons. In this case, the audience can mentally measure the dragon using the objects that appear alongside it in the text. The manner in which Lagarfljótsormurinn was bound to the bottom of the river gives us an idea to its length and width, since we can logically assume it is no longer or wider than the bed of the fjord itself. A dragon that lands on a ship to attack people cannot do so if it is many times the size of ship. However, there are many more cases where we can only get a general sense of the scale of the dragon, and it seems to depend a great deal on context rather than the specific diction used to describe the dragon itself. For this reason, I do not discuss the size of dragons as a separate attribute in this thesis.

Stories of water serpents dwelling under the surface have been recorded from all around Iceland, but Lagarfljótsormurinn is "the best-known beast of this kind [in

Iceland]... inhabiting the river Lagarfljót in East Iceland, whose fame has spread far and wide outside its native land,” though there are other versions of the story located elsewhere in Iceland (Hlíðberg 123).⁹ Sections of the story of Lagarfljótsormurinn were told about other monsters before being “transferred to the river Lagarfljót about 1680,” specifically the parts regarding the gold and being bound under the water (Hlíðberg 123).

The use of worm-dragons exists outside Icelandic folktales and Norse mythology and an example of dragons with this “ormur” chassis appears in art. The Christian Saint Olaf is frequently portrayed standing on top of a dragon. Historically, Saint Olaf, also referred to as the Fat or Stout, is known for ruling Norway (1015-1028) as well as leading its conversion to Christianity (Lagasse). Despite being a foreign ruler and saint, he was of great importance to Christian Icelanders. The National Museum of Iceland describes one of the statues in its collection, which holds this pose: “holding an axe and the orb of office. He is often shown with his foot on a devil in the form of a dragon, symbolizing his victory over paganism” (Carving of St. Olaf). This particular pose does not take place in the sagas regarding Saint Olaf, but is a common representation of him.

The dragon that appears under Saint Olaf differs significantly from the other dragons presented in Icelandic art, for it has a human head. In folktales and mythology around the world there are examples of human-headed monsters¹⁰, but there are no such

⁹ Lagarfljótsormurinn could be seen as an anomaly as it has transitioned from the medieval period into a modern cryptid. However, in the capacity of this thesis it is treated as a creature from the folklore, regardless of how it may be perceived in modern times.

¹⁰ This specifically refers to creatures that possess a human head but no other human features. The Sumerian lamassu would be an example.

examples in Icelandic folktales or Norse mythology. I consider it to be a dragon because of the nouns associated with it and because it fits the definition of a dragon with its serpentine chassis.

The Middle English definition of “wurm” was used to show that the cognates of the Icelandic term “ormur” clearly allowed its use for dragons. However, two Christian elements appeared there that are relevant here. “Wurm” could be understood not only as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, but also as a devil or an alternative name for Satan. These elements provide clues as how the dragon under Saint Olaf can be understood to be “ormur.” Historically, the Icelandic Christian bibles use “höggormur,” a striking serpent, as the noun for the serpent that lives in the Garden of Eden, while modern Icelandic uses “höggormur” specifically for the Viperidae family of snake, which is a family of striking serpents. When the serpent’s involvement in the temptation is uncovered, God bestows eternal strife upon the serpent:

Þá sagði Guð Drottinn til *höggormsins*: “Af því að þú gjörðir þetta þá vert þú bölvadur á meðal allra kvikinda og á meðal allra dýra á jörðu. Þú skalt ganga á þínum kviði og eta mold jarðar alla þína lífdaga. Og eg vil setja óvinskap á milli þín og kvinnunnar og á milli þíns sæðis og hennar sæðis. Það sama skal í sundur merja þitt höfuð. Og þú skalt bíta hann í hælinn. (Hið íslenska biblíufélag; emphasis added)

[The Lord God said to the *serpent*,

“Because you have done this,

cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel.”] (National Council of the Churches of Christ 1989;
emphasis added)

The continuous enmity between humans and snakes influences the interpretation of Saint Olaf’s pose over the dragon. The vanquished dragon is an embodiment of the evil serpent from the garden. This creature is both a dragon and a devil. Even with such complexity compressed into this dragon, the Middle English “wurm” still fits it perfectly, as it satisfies most if not all of the possible definitions.

The following figures (Figures 1-2) show Olaf’s dragon with elongated and serpent-like features, especially the neck and tail. The body is slightly bulky, possibly to accommodate its four limbs. At the end of the tail on the statue there is a small section that is flattened like a barb. The worm or snake-like features of its neck and tail, as well as the clawed feet, make it primarily bestial in nature. It is worth reinforcing that even though these dragons may not look like dragons to us, they did to the people of the time.

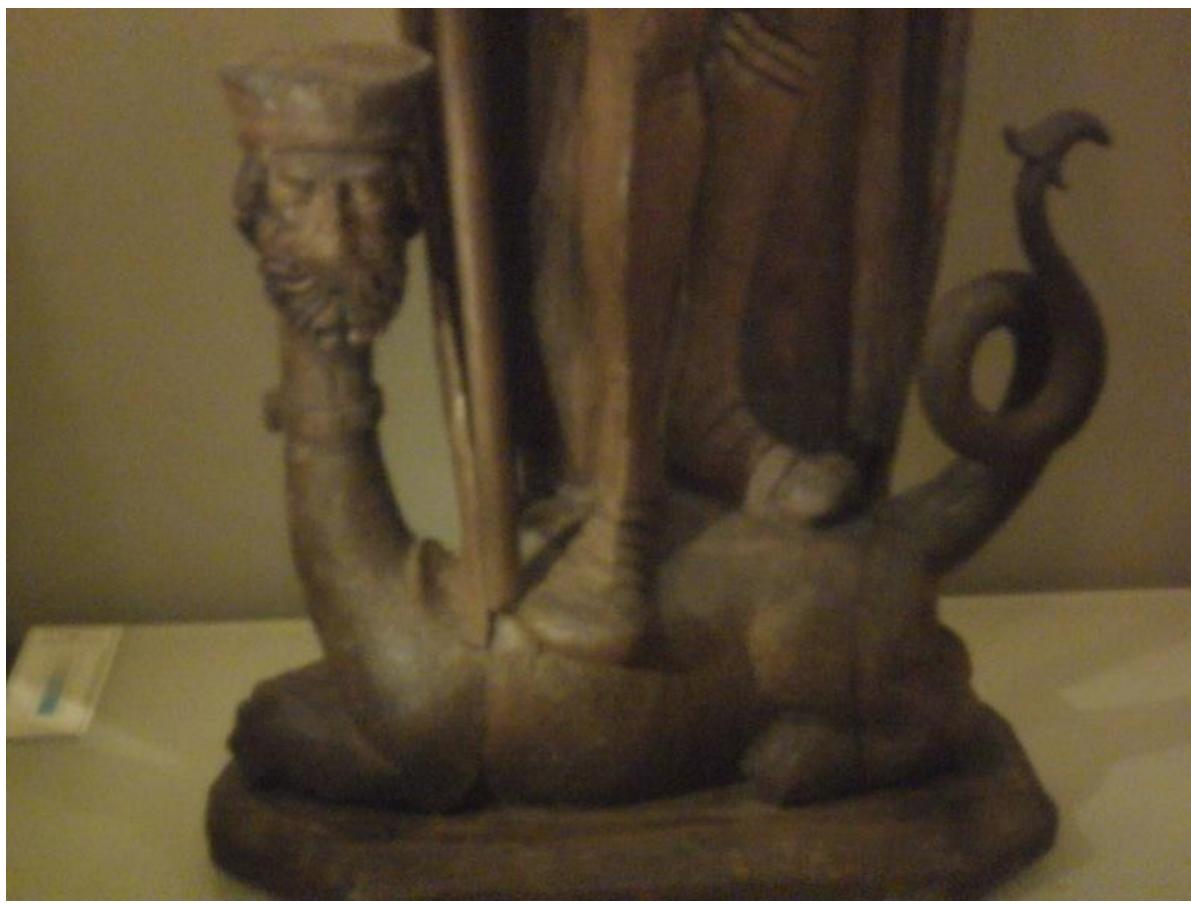


Figure 1: St. Olaf and the Devil (1). Carving dated to the 16th century. Picture Credit: Ryan Stewart, Carving is located in The National Museum of Iceland.



Figure 3: St. Olaf and the Devil (2). Carving dated to 16th century. Picture Credit: Ryan Stewart, Carving is located in The National Museum of Iceland.

The dragon in the carving may not seem so worm- or serpent-like, but it has a serpentine chassis. Its counterpart, a manuscript illumination of Saint Olaf in the same pose and style, does have more serpent-like traits (Figure 4). Here, the body of the dragon is slimmer, unlike the rotund body of the carving, and as a whole the dragon seems serpent-like. Saint Olaf's dragon is a strong example of a dragon that would not likely be identified as such if it were not for the precise terminology used; the museum knows it is a dragon because sources describe the creature as a dragon in this portrayal of Saint Olaf .



Figure 4: Illumination of Saint Olaf and Dragon from manuscript AM 160 4to. The manuscript is of Kristinréttur Árna Biskups, and is from the year 1390. Picture Credit: Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. Edited for brightness and contrast.

The “ormur” chassis is also seen in other visual examples, with a more sinuous body which is easy to identify. Although the next illumination is damaged (Figure 5), it clearly depicts a dragon with a snake or worm-like body, again with legs but without a human head. In the remaining segments of the manuscript page, this impaled dragon can be seen coiling around the horse and rider. While the dragon does bear other features such as wings, and feet or claws, it is very distinctly serpentine in form if not nature.

Figure 5 may be recognized by some as a representation of St. George famously slaying a dragon. Such a story would carry weight with the Icelandic audience, regardless of their religious beliefs. Though the story would be foreign in origin, any stories or art presented in this thesis are done with the acknowledgement that they are not Icelandic in origin but are filtered through the Icelandic perspective.

There are some conventions in Icelandic art that may influence the appearances of dragons. This thesis is based primarily on Icelandic texts, so it is hard to separate their features into features the artist added specifically for the dragon and those that are a result of a certain style of art. However, while certain elements of the art may in fact be the result of conventions, they still agree and compliment the interpretations suggested by the text.



Figure 5: Damaged manuscript leaf depicting St. George slaying the dragon. AM 673a III 4to. Dated between 1450-1475, this manuscript is a copy of Teiknibokin. Picture Credit: Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

The serpentine chassis of these dragons is not the only feature that characterizes dragons. Other dragons carry characteristics that build off of this chassis. These characteristics can now be examined because any confusion regarding what noun is used to address them has been dealt with. The context provided by additional descriptors offers more information and a possible distinction between the terms “dreki” and “ormur.” Dragons that are described as having coils are represented throughout the medieval period, though these descriptions are at best sparse occurrences. More significantly, the use of coils as a descriptor coincides with uses of both “ormur” and “dreki,” indicating that it was compatible with either term. However, the addition of wings could indicate that with sufficient changes to the chassis the creature was no longer considered “ormur” and that “ormur” requires certain characteristics that are no longer being met. The declining use of “ormur” means that if there was a shift in preferred diction from “ormur” to “dreki,” possibly to allow the use of wings, the transition may have happened before the period tracked by the timeline (Figure 1, Page 27). Even though “ormur” is not used as much in later times, “dreki” should be understood to cover the basic chassis presented with “ormur.”

One result exposed by the timeline and parsing the sources was a notable absence. There are no connections between the use of “ormur” and wings, or the power of flight. While “ormur” can have many additional descriptors added to it, such as lizard-like feet, “ormur” does not coincide with wings. Only dragons referred to as “dreki” can have the

ability to fly, or are portrayed with wings, hence the common form “flugdreki” meaning a flying dragon. “Ormur” dragons never fly, nor are they described with wings.

“Dreki” is the word used to describe dragons that may or may not be winged, and “ormur” is the word for dragons that were land or water-bound. However, the same data could also suggest that “ormur” and “dreki” could not, and were not ever used in reference to the same type of being, and that there are two distinct forms of dragons being presented. Because the two terms were never used at the same time in a text, an example of the earlier rule that one text means one term, it is possible that there was a very clear distinction between “ormur” and “dreki.” This would explain the lack of flying “ormur” and fit with the theorized transition from “ormur” to “dreki”; “ormur” was simply becoming an outdated creature, being replaced with the more anatomically complex “dreki.” This in many ways echoes the thought experiment proposed alongside *How to Train Your Dragon*, that neither form could be said to be more of a dragon than the other, though there are distinctions made among the variations that exist. Put a different way, it does not matter if “ormur” and “(flug)dreki” suggest different physical appearances because both terms were understood at the time to mean “dragon” just as both “platypus” and “elephant” refer to mammals but each term carries different expectations of descriptors.

Fish and Whales

This section builds upon the earlier discussion of the serpent-like chassis by focusing on two ways that dragons are described as having features normally associated with fish and whales: the use of kennings and the use of precise diction. Both of these areas of discussion demonstrate an aquatic connection or connotation independently of the other, and there is little overlap between them.

Icelandic texts commonly use literary devices called kennings, which convey links between ideas and concepts. Kennings are poetic phrases that carried a metaphorical meaning, such as “sword-liquid” to mean blood, and were part of the oral traditions in Iceland that became incorporated into texts when such poems and sagas were recorded. They could be used to fit poetic requirements, such as alliteration, or as easy-to-remember phrases to fill out a line, an important element for an oral presentation. Similar poetic devices occur in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and they are thought to have been used “so a whole line can be rapidly and easily constructed by the oral poet, built from a ready-made diction” (Finnegan 59). These poetic devices allow the poet to construct the meter in blocks rather than individual pieces:

They offer, for each god, hero or object, a choice of epithets, each one with a different metrical shape. In other words, the particular epithet chosen by the poet may have nothing to do with, for example, whether Achilles is “brilliant” or “swift-footed” at this particular point in the poem – the choice depends on which epithet fits the meter. (Fagles 15)

Despite their value as a tool for meeting poetic requirements and functions, kennings do not have a singular function as a poetic device. A message must still be effectively conveyed, and there comes a point at which that message can be lost in the poetry. Repetitive use, as well as a rigid meter, can stifle the actual meaning behind the kenning, turning it into a simple device to fill out blocks of poetry. However, in a formulaic meter the poet may not have many options to fill their meter without these poetic building blocks:

The argument for full formularity has clay feet. A poet composing in a strict, demanding meter is bound to repeat syntactical combinations in identical positions, and the stricter the meter, the higher the incidence of such repeated patterns. (Fagles 17)

While the meter may demand that certain gaps need to be filled in, kennings give the poet options to swap pieces in and out more easily.

Kennings are frequently more than simple epithets, simultaneously relying on and building upon, the audiences' knowledge of the world, though both kennings and epithets are poetic devices that serve the poet's needs and desires. Both were a staple of oral poetry, which is a format in which each speaker has the opportunity to alter the words to their needs or desires as they recite, so long as the core of the poem or story remains the same.

Ragnar's saga contains two particular kennings that occur in close proximity to each other. Specifically, this occurs when Sigurð describes his victory in slaying a dragon earlier in the saga:

Hætt hefik leyfðu lífi,

litfögr kona, vетra

vák at *foldar fiski*

fimmtán gamall, mínu;

hafa skalk, böl nema bíti,

bráðrakinn mér dauða,

heiðar lax til hjarta

hringleginn, vel, smýgra. (Ragnar Saga Loðbrokr; emphasis added)

[I have risked my famous life, beautiful woman;

fifteen winters old

And I vanquished the *earth fish*.

Near misfortune, a swift

death for me—save

I have pierced well to the heart

the *ringed salmon-of-the-heath.*] (Van Dyke 13; emphasis added)

It is worth taking a moment here to note some of the poetic functions of these kennings, before discussing their meanings. Fore-rhyme and alliteration can be seen throughout the

Icelandic passage, and the kennings are included within this pattern.¹¹ This passage also demonstrates the balance between message and poetry; the use of “lax,” which has no rhyming requirements, is used in a phrase that otherwise has a very strong use of alliteration, drawing attention to the un-alliterative words selected. As for the kennings themselves, the translation from Icelandic to English is not the cause of the seemingly surprising lines. In this case the kennings “earth fish” and “ringed salmon of the heath,” are unexpected since they refer to the dragon that is slain by Sigurð.

Elsewhere in the saga, “ormur” is used to describe the dragon that Sigurð kills as well as his signature birthmark, a dragon’s shape in his eye which gives him the honorific “Ormr í Auga” (Van Dyke 34). The use of fish, or salmon, is unexpected in a kenning alongside this usage of “ormur” for the same beast, given what is understood so far about the term even though it does not appear in this quote. The kennings and “ormur” connote two very different types of beings, though it is possible that the two terms are in fact compatible with each other. If it were understood by the audience at the time that dragons, like the one slain by Sigurð, were actually considered offshoots of the ferocious creatures that live in the water, then the difference between the terms is lessened. Aquatic dragons like Lagarfljótsormurinn, would help demonstrate the relationship between fish kennings and this non-aquatic dragon because they fill in the unmentioned void between the two.

The link between fish and dragons suggested by these specific kennings is not the

¹¹ Fore-rhyme is using similar sounding syllables from the beginnings of words instead the end (end-rhyme)

only source indicative of this relationship. The precise diction of a verse uses terminology to describe specific parts of dragons and provides more technical clues. By precise diction I mean to indicate that the nouns used in Icelandic convey more detailed and specific information than their English counterparts. In Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa there is an encounter with a dragon as King Ólaf, Björn, and several men sailed over the seas.

Þar varð sá atburður er Björn fylgdi konungi og sigldi með liði sínu fyrir sunnan sjá að fló yfir lið konungs flugdreki og lagðist að þeim og vildi hremma mann einn en Björn var nær staddur og brá skildi yfir hann en hremmdi hann næsta í gegnum skjöldinn. Síðan grípur Björn í *sporðinn drekans* annarri hendi en annarri hjó hann fyrir aftan vængina og gekk þar í sundur og féll drekinn niður dauður. (Bjarnar saga Hítdœlakappa; emphasis added)

[There was an event when Björn accompanied the king and sailed with the group over the south seas, when a flying-dragon flew over the king's men. It attacked them and would have snatched a man but Björn was nearby and quickly moved a shield over the man, though the dragon came close to snatching him through the shield. Björn grabbed the *tail of the dragon* and with his other hewed at the wing and it was broken, the dragon falling down dead.] (emphasis added)

While the English translation conveys the same basic concept as the Icelandic texts, it does not convey the nuanced connotations that exist in the Icelandic language. The word “sporð” is used to refer to the dragon's tail and is defined as the “tail (of fish, whale, seal, dragon), tail flippers (of seal), whale flukes” (Sporð/ur). This term suggests a very

specific kind of tail. In Icelandic, the words used to describe tails focus on form rather than function. For comparison, a similar term, “rófa,” is primarily used for a feline tail, but can be a generic term for a tail. It applies more to the sinuous form of a tail. “Rófa” simply translates to English as tail, as would many other specific terms, but in Icelandic it refers specifically to the shape or appearance and it would not be used to describe a dog’s tail (“skott”), a horse’s tail (“tagl”), or a bird’s tail or tail-feathers (“stél”). A more interesting example is “hali” which is used for the ropey and tufted tails of cows, lions, and devils (Pers. Comm. Peter John Buchan. December 19, 2017). The inclusion of devils, an imaginary being among real mammals, demonstrates that the word is associated with a specific appearance of the tail, not the creature to which it belongs.

We can try to reproduce the imagery of a dragon’s tail by looking at these other animal tails covered by the term “sporð”: fish, whales, and seals. There are some similarities between the tails of fish and whales as they share the same basic silhouette or outline of a tail. Their tails both feature a narrowing trunk before the flattened fin or fluke extensions, so we could hypothesize that dragon that are described with “sporðr” have a tail that is similar in appearance. Seal tails are short, stubby appendages that are not actually used for propulsion. This demonstrates that there is an underlying problem within the group of “sporðr” animals in that the skeletal system and anatomy are quite different across all three creatures (Katona, Rough and Richardson). However, including the hind legs of a seal does make it closer to the other two visually.

The hind flippers of phocid seals and walrus that are found in Iceland propel the animals through the water by alternately moving horizontally. The active flipper ‘flares’ on the power stroke and looks, in profile, similar to a fish tail. (Pers. Comm. Dr. Robert Stewart. October 13, 2018.)

This indicates again that the visual aspects are more important to the definition of “sporðr” than the underlying anatomy. The rear end of a seal can be described by the term “sporðr” so long as it is understood it does not accurately reflect the actual tail of the seal.

What does this mean for the tail of a dragon? It would be difficult to state with confidence which of the three examples, seals, fish, or whales, would be the closest approximation. Does the term “sporðr” imply the dragon has a fish tail, which would help provide context and reasoning for the earth-fish kennings of *Ragnar’s saga*? Or does it rather suggest a whale tail? Ultimately, these questions are focused on the anatomy of an imaginary being, so absolute certainty is impossible. Nonetheless, the one feature that is shared among the non-imaginary creatures is the flattening and splitting profile of their rear area, which is precisely what the term “sporðr” suggests, decisively showing that the appearance trumps all, even anatomy, when it comes to these specific descriptive terms.

In Ketilssaga Hœngs, we see a phrase that uses “fish” to refer to a dragon, but in a different manner compared to *Ragnar’s saga*. Here it is used as a direct comparison of the appearance of the dragon.

Eitt kveld eftir dagsetur tók Ketill öxi sína í hönd sér og gekk norður á eyna. En er hann var kominn eigi allskammt í burt frá bænum, sér hann *dreka* einn fljúga að sér norðan úr björgunum. *Hann hafði lykkju og sporð sem ormur, en vængi sem dreki.* Eldur þótti honum brenna úr augum hans og gini. *Eigi þóttist Ketill slíkan fisk séð hafa eða nokkura óvætti aðra,* því að hann vildi heldur eiga að verjast fjölda manna. Dreki sá sótti að honum, en Ketill varðist með öxinni vel og karlmannlega. Svo gekk lengi, allt þar til að Ketill gat höggið á lykkjuna og þar í sundur drekann. Datt hann þá niður dauður. (Chappell; emphasis added)

[In the evening after sunset Ketil took his axe in his hand and went north to the islands. However, he had not gone very far from inhabited areas when he saw a single *dragon* fly out of a hill to the north. *It had writhing coils and a tail like a serpent, but wings like a dragon.* Fire angrily burned out of its eyes and mouth. *Ketil thought he had never seen such a fish, or any other such being,* and that he would rather defend himself against a multitude of men than face it. The dragon came at him, but Ketil defended himself well and mightily with his axe. It went that way for a long time before Ketil pierced a coil and then cut the dragon in half. It fell down dead.] (Chappell; emphasis added)

The Icelandic lines that describe the dragon use precise terminology but rely on the audience to supply the context required to make sense of it, and the English translation reworks it in a way for better readability. In particular, “Hann hafði lykkju og sporð sem ormur/ It had writhing coils and a tail like a serpent” shows the meshing of “ormur,” and

the fish descriptor of “sporðr” demonstrates the precision of the Icelandic language though what the terms specifically mean is harder to dissect (Chappell).

Because the definition of “sporðr” does not include snakes or worms, the line “Hann hafði lykkju og sporð sem ormur” could be translated several ways. We could read it as Chappell has translated it, by using the English equivalent “tail” without addressing the precise meaning carried in the Icelandic. This would be an imperfect translation. Perhaps we should understand there is more of the meaning behind “sporðr” than “sem ormur,” that there is more to this dragon’s end than a simple snake tail. Translating it to: “It had writhing coils and a tail (which belongs to a dragon) like a serpent” makes more sense but is not as elegant. “Sporðr” may only be used here because grammatically it is a dragon’s tail that is being referred to. If it were a cow’s tail was being described as snake-like the sentence would be “hali sem ormur.” Chappell’s translation of this text demonstrates both the complex nature of translation, but also exemplifies that the use of “sporðr” has a very precise meaning to it.

There is another way of interpreting this passage. Being reasonably certain that “sporðr” is being used as the correct noun for the tail end of a dragon, it is the context of “sem ormur” that drastically changes how we understand the sentence. This line may be seen to break the earlier rule regarding the use of “ormur” and “dreki,” but “ormur” is used here as a descriptive term, not as a noun for the dragon. “Like a serpent” may be exactly what the author originally intended, because if this dragon had a dragon’s tail, there would be no need to clarify it. However, if this dragon’s “sporðr” was not actually

“sporðr” but rather “sem ormur” then there would be a need by the author to clarify that this dragon had a serpent’s tail in lieu of what normally would be expected at the end of a dragon. Therefore, the use of “ormur” in this sentence is used solely for its grammatical role as the proper noun for the area of the dragon, the tail, being described as serpent-like. This interpretation also agrees with the suggested literary rule that “dreki” and “ormur” are never used to mean a dragon simultaneously in one text: the author here used the two terms to highlight a difference.

Visual evidence can help clarify whether the dragon of Ketil’s saga should be understood to have a flattened fish tail or a snake tail, regardless of how Chappell translates it. The dragon shown here, Figure 6, has a flattened, four-lobed tail, calling to mind a fish tail. The tail itself is longer than just the splayed section though. This hybridization of fish/whale tails does show that there was some consideration of how a dragon’s tail should look.

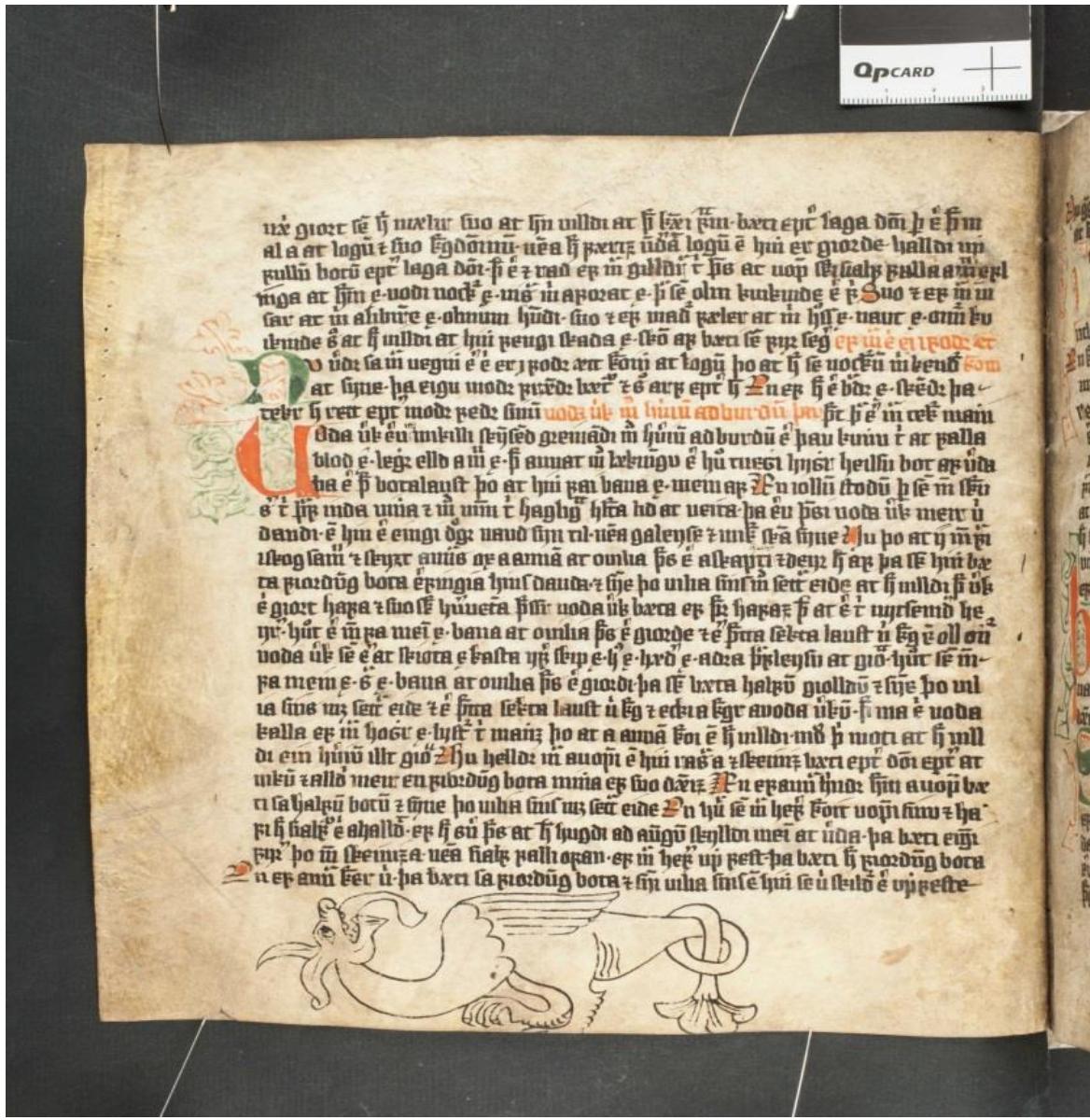


Figure 6: Manuscript illumination depicted a dragon with a "sporð" tail from AM 132 4to. Dated between 1440 and 1460, this manuscript contains a copy of Tekinibokin. Picture Credit: Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies.

With the four lobes, this “sporð” is clearly not a tail that would be found on a serpent.

This leads me to believe that “sporð” would be the grammatically correct term to use when referring to the tail of a dragon despite what it looks like. However, “sporð” also carries the inherent appearance of a tail similar to a fish or whale, the other creatures

whose tails are described by “sporðr.” This is why the author would need to clarify that the dragon Ketil sees had coils and tail like a serpent, because it varied from what could be considered normal for a dragon.

Birds

The wings of dragons are rarely mentioned directly in the texts, although there are several more texts that describe dragons in the act of flying. Winged or flying dragons appear to have the most in common with modern interpretation of dragons, such as those seen in *Game of Thrones*, which often depict a serpentine-like body with wings. The matter of few useful examples is an issue, however. There are a large number of sagas and stories that refer to the dragon as “flugdreki,” “flying dragon” in English, and no descriptors are used to inform us about the manner in which the dragon flies. The flying dragon in Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa attacks the ship, endangering the entire crew, though Björn slays it quickly. While the wings are mentioned when they are being hewn apart, no information is given about their appearance. Wings may be seized or hewn, but neither of those terms describe the wing itself. The verbs “rip” and “tear” in this passage refer to the manner of destruction, not the wings themselves.

The line in Ketilssaga mentioned earlier suggests that there is a unique property associated with winged dragons. When the saga line reads, “vængi sem dreki/ wings like a dragon,” it would be easy to dismiss what looks like basic tautology: a dragon has wings like a dragon. This seemingly redundant description suggests that the wings of a

dragon are special, in the same manner as a “tail like a dragon’s tail” which was discussed earlier. Icelandic dragons have attributes associated with serpents, fish, and flying animals. Although there is little wildlife on Iceland itself, all these forms are presented and Icelanders had opportunities to travel Scandinavia where they would see different creatures, or hear stories of different creatures.

The line about Ketil’s dragon does not contain an internal solution to the question “what do the wings of an Icelandic dragon look like?” so other sources are required to provide the answer. In a passage of The Seeress’ Prophecy, or Völuspá in Icelandic, Níðhoggr makes an appearance, and we can find a clue about dragon wings.

Par kemr inn dimmi dreki fljúgandi,

naðr fránn, neðan frá Niðafjöllum;

berr sér í fjöðrum, - flýgr völl yfir, -

Níðhoggr nái. (Völuspá; emphasis added)

[There comes the dark dragon flying,

The shining serpent, up from Dark-of-moon Hills;

Níðhoggr flies over the plain, in his *wings*

He carries corpses]. (Völuspá; emphasis added)

In Old Icelandic, two words are used as terminology for wings, “vængr” and “fjöðr.” The English cognates are fairly recognizable as being wing and feather, respectively. In the phrase “berr sér í fjöðrum,” “fjöðrum” is in the dative plural form of “fjöðr,” and means feathers, so the Icelandic line translates word for word to “bore himself in feathers.” As with the earlier example of “sporðr” and various other terms for tails, Icelandic language leans towards precise meanings for each word, in ways that the English language does not. This precision of language leads to the conclusion that “fjöðrum” is not interchangeable term with “vængum” and that it was selected specifically by the writer to distinguish them from featherless wings.¹²

This interpretation of the word “fjöðrum,” which suggests that Icelandic dragons had feathered wings, may change the world view of dragons. Blust has recently argued that feathers were solely associated with dragons in the Mesoamerican region, but the revised translation of *Völuspá* offered here clearly demonstrates that Icelandic dragons were not accurately represented in his work (Blust 527). Níðhoggr’s feathered wings certainly do not fall into that geographical area and no known history suggests interactions with those cultures, meaning that it is more likely that the cultures developed dragons with feathered wings independently of each other rather than one influencing the other.

The concept of dragons possessing feathery wings would rely heavily on the audience of the time. If it was considered common knowledge that dragons had avian

¹² While there is no credited author for *Völuspá* there was a decision made by the author writing the poem in this form.

wings then there would be little need to describe them or specify their appearance. This reliance on the audience to supply details was seen earlier with the dragon tail in Ketilssaga, as the storyteller would know that the audience could mentally fill in the appearance of the dragon without having to go into details that did not directly impact the story.

It is with respect to wings that Icelandic art from the time provides the strongest supplementary evidence. This interpretation of feathered wings is corroborated by carvings and manuscript illustrations, with feathers appearing on one hundred percent of the winged dragons in illuminations charted in the timeline. In other words, none of the dragons in the timeline had featherless wings. This is not to say that all dragons possess feathered wings, but the dragons that do have wings in the artwork I encountered all have feathers.

One physical example of these feathered wings is the Valþjófsstaður Door. Currently residing in the National Museum of Iceland, the Valþjófsstaður Door is a church door from medieval Iceland, though the rest of the structure is no longer intact. The door is dated to about 1200 AD and bears two roundels showing a medieval tale known as Le Chevalier au Lion in three parts within the top roundel:

At the bottom we see a knight with his hunting falcon. He kills a dragon which has caught a lion, and then the lion is depicted gratefully following the knight. Finally, the lion lies at the knight's grave, mourning him. The grave is inscribed in runes:

Behold the mighty king here buried who slew this dragon. In the lower roundel are four interlaced dragons. (The Valþjófsstaður Door from Þjoðminjasafn Íslands)

It is clear that the wings of the falcon, which are best seen in the lower half of the top roundel, are made in the same style as the wings of all the dragons on the door. Though the dragon's wings are larger in size, and could contain more detail than the finer wings of the falcon, they bear the same long striated style with small marks crosswise showing the end of feathers. It is not clear if the markings featured on the back of the dragon are meant to be feathers or scales.

The lower roundel shows four dragons entwined in a knot design, a popular style of the time (The Valþjófsstaður Door from Þjoðminjasafn Íslands). These dragons are carved in the same style as the one in the upper roundel, very worm-like, possibly showing the heritage of “orm,” though there seems to be some compression on their wings, possibly a choice made by the carver to allow more room for the sinuous bodies of the dragons.



Figure 7: The top roundel of the Valpjófsstaður door. Curiously the story is read bottom to top, left to right, which is contrary to the writing style of the times. Picture Credit: Ryan Stewart; the object is located in the National Museum of Iceland. Edited for contrast.



Figure 8: The bottom roundel of the Valþjófsstaður door. Dragon heads are slightly offset from cardinal directions close to the edge. Wings and clasping claws form the inner section. Picture Credit: Ryan Stewart; the object is located in the National Museum of Iceland. Edited for contrast.

Though the bottom roundel was carved into an intricate knot, the top roundel shows the dragon with a long snakelike body (bottom half of the top roundel) that is threatening to entrap the lion. This style of carving and depiction can be compared to another piece, a sixteenth century drinking horn, where the feathered wings are shown in much more detail.



Figure 9: Carved drinking horn with a dragon forming the stopper. Picture Credit: Victoria Novelli, 2014. The horn is located in the National Museum of Iceland.

This drinking horn was crafted in 1598 by Brynjólfur Jónsson (The Valþjófsstaður Door). Brynjólfur was “the first Icelandic artist known nationally for his work. His work and that of his contemporaries demonstrates interaction between traditionalism and international artistic trends” (The Valþjófsstaður Door). The horn features Christian scenes, as well as a dragon devouring a man, who functions as a stopper for the horn. The wings feature small incisions that all face a single direction giving the impression of feathered wings, rather than a smooth or hairless wing like those of a bat or insect.

The body of the drinking horn dragon also features similar marks to the Valþjófsstaður Door dragons, starting behind the dragon's head and running down its back, possibly suggesting the use of feathers in lieu of scales. The small notches in the pattern seem indicative of the center spine of a feather, the rachis, as well as the striated barbules that form the edge (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology). Alternatively, they could be indicating a type of ridged, or keeled, scale, though scales do not clearly appear in any manuscript illustration and there is no mention of it in texts.

Other imagery reinforces the notion of feathered wings (see for example Figure 6). Figure 10 depicts a manuscript illumination of dragon inserted in the text, partially in the margin, marking a new paragraph. The wings of this dragon are also feathered, though they appear cramped and forced onto the page. Does this mean that the illustrator thought it was better to have cramped wings than for the dragon to lack them? The tail and exhaled plume of the dragon are elaborate and intricately detailed, similar to the swirl and knot designs of the Valþjófsstaður Door, but the wings seem plain by comparison. The coloring of the illumination suggests that the portion of the artwork that is embedded in the text is the valuable area, and the rest of the art is, in every sense, of marginal importance. This particular illumination raises such questions about its creation, but ultimately the focus is on its end result: a dragon with feathered wings.

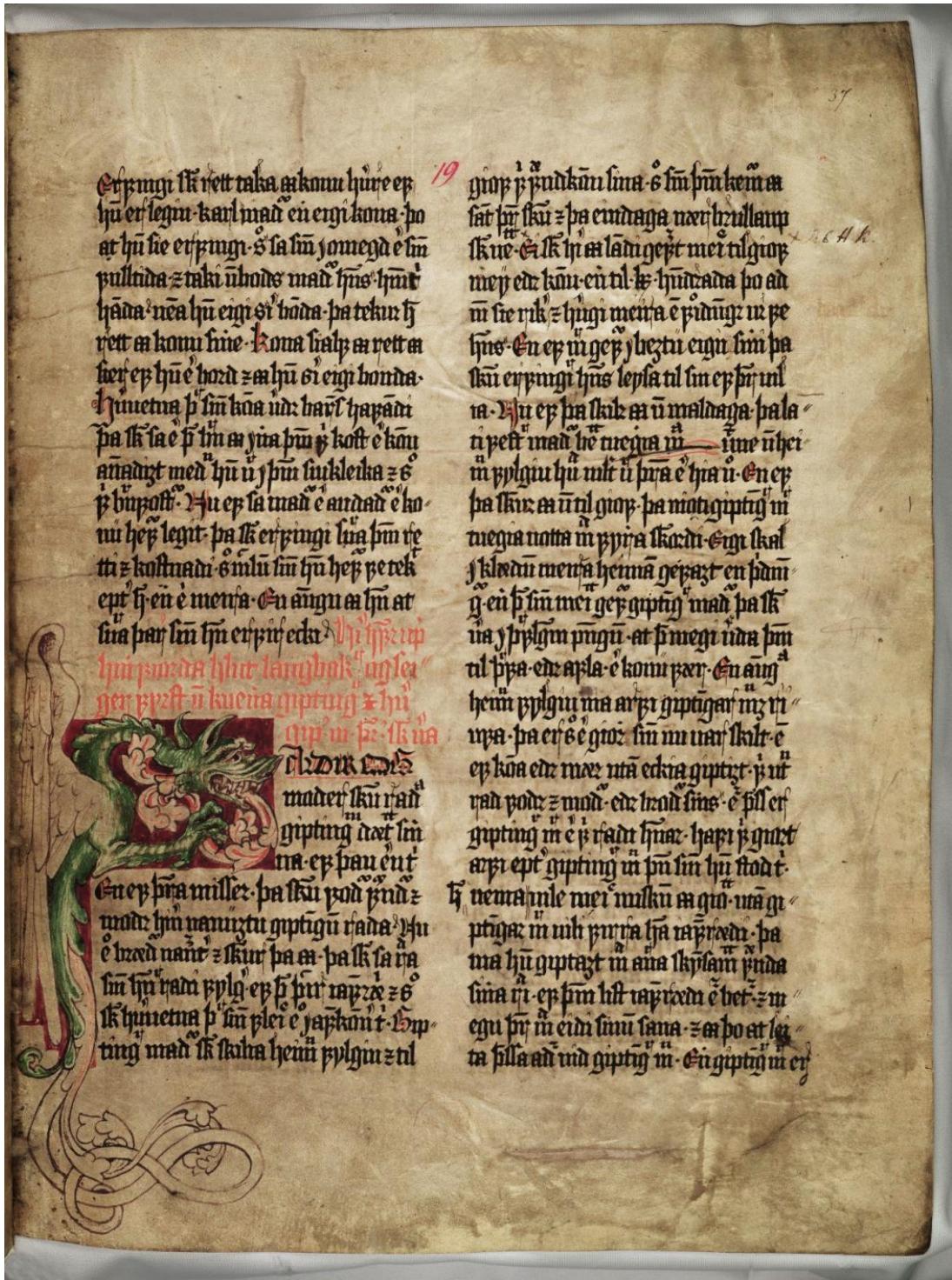


Figure 10: Manuscript illumination with a dragon in the margin and text. AM02 0350 IS contains Kristinréttur Árna Biskups and is dated to 1393. Picture Credit: Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. Edited for contrast.

It was stated earlier that with a vast array of descriptors applied to dragons, no one descriptor could be universally applied. It is tempting to say that in light of the regular use of feathered wings there may be an exception to this rule. The overwhelming use of feathers, posed alongside the apparent void of bat or insect wings, or any other kind of wing at all, may imply that there was only one kind of wing used for dragons. Not all Icelandic dragons had feathers because not all Icelandic dragons are winged.

Bird-lore and Dragons

There is also justification for this use of bird wings on dragons in both folktales and mythology. Birds are significant in Icelandic culture and Nordic culture as well. They are frequently seen as wise or clever characters in stories, or beings that accompany gods. In regards to *Völuspá*, having an avian appearance could create a mixed message regarding Níðhoggr's intelligence or perhaps his significance as he carries corpses in his feathered wings. Given that Níðhoggr's role in Ragnarök is to carry out the death of the old world and usher in the birth of the new one, he plays a role that is given more attention than most of the Norse gods in this poem (Larrington 13).

Völsunga saga suggests that there is a general link between dragons and birds. When Sigurd burns his finger on the scalding blood of Fáfnir's roasting heart, and sticks his finger in his mouth, he gains the ability to understand the language of birds (Byock 66). While this ability is helpful, both short-term and long-term, it is directly related to

the belief that eating Fáfnir's heart, and blood by default, will provide the consumer with some gift of power (Byock 66).

There are also examples of birds being specifically endowed with supernatural abilities. Two birds of importance are found in the mythology in Huginn and Muninn, the ravens that belong to Óðinn. They scour the world each day for new information and report it to Óðinn. Being the pets of the father figure and chief of the Norse pantheon, there would be a certain amount of reverence towards ravens in general and these two in particular.

In Icelandic folklore the raven plays an interesting role. Its appearance at churches foretells death, but it is a good creature to feed and keep around the house as its intellect has saved people (Stefánsson 307). By placing the heart of a raven under their tongue, an individual can be granted the supernatural intelligence of birds, though the heart will need to be stored in a jar that has had nothing in it before (Stefánsson 308). This could be seen as a sanitized parallel of Sigurd eating Fáfnir's heart.

The most tangible connection of birds to dragons also comes from Icelandic folklore, and is unlike many other examples of dragons. It describes the peculiar birth of a dragon, suggesting dragons can be born through circumstances other than breeding:

Ordinarily nothing but eagles are hatched from eagles' eggs, but if a little gold is placed in the nest there comes from one of the eggs a stone of wonderful virtue, and from the other a fearful dragon. ... Many people have been skeptical of these

stories about [the eagle], and once a man named John determined to place a bit of gold in the nest to test the stories. Many warned him against this, but without effect, and the gold piece was placed with the two eggs. ... After some weeks the people were one day horrified to see a great dragon come flying from the mountains, seize a two-year-old colt in its claws, and fly back again in among the crags. (Stefánsson 305)

In all the sagas there is no mention of how the dragons came to be, except for those that were originally men who transformed into dragons, such as Fáfnir who took on the form of a dragon to protect his ill-gotten inheritance (Byock 59). This passage shows that there is a bond between birds and dragons, that the two could be more related to each other than simple appearances would show.

Problematic Descriptions

The terms discussed so far have provided information and insight into the appearances of Icelandic dragons. However, not all descriptive terms are equal, and some cannot match the quality of information provided by others. These lower grade descriptive nouns, terms, and adjectives appear in two varieties. First, some dragon features appear in illustrations but do not regularly appear in texts. The focus of this thesis is on Icelandic texts, and these feature virtually no textual descriptions of attributes such as legs, claws, or fangs. These features were therefore excluded from further analysis. Second, there may be features that appear often enough in text to be tracked and listed in the timeline, and are also illustrated in art, but are dead ends in terms of understanding the appearance of Icelandic dragons.

Examining one of these dead end descriptors helps show why the descriptors examined were selected. On the timeline, the use of poison appears as a common descriptor: five of the ten literary sources tracked present dragons as poisonous, or in the context of a poisonous environment. However, the volume of appearances does not affect the amount of information a term can provide.

Before continuing, it is important to note that in English there is a scientific difference between “poison” and “venom” that is not matched in the Icelandic. The Icelandic term “eitr” could be translated as either term, which depends greatly on the context it is used, but it is more commonly translated into English as “poison.” Whereas in English we may describe a snake as being venomous, “eitr” is used to describe the

“eitrsnákr” in question. Because the Icelandic sources and their translations default to referring to these dragons as poisonous I will follow that example, though venomous may be a more appropriate English term in some cases. While elsewhere in the thesis I discuss the specificity of Icelandic language, “eitr” is a case where English is more specific than Icelandic.

In the texts consulted, the poisonous capabilities of the dragons appear in a number of forms, differing from dragon to dragon. In *Völuspá* we can see an example of a dragon that is not explicitly poisonous itself but is described in such a way as to present the dragon as unbothered, or even comfortable, in the constant presence of poison. Corpse-Strand is depicted as a hall that has been woven from the spines of serpents, or dragons, which leaks poison down from the roof: “Falla eitrdropar inn um ljóra, sá er undinn salr orma hryggjum” (*Völuspá*; emphasis added). The hall is home to the dragon Níðhoggr and “men who swore false oaths and murderers, and those who seduced the close confidantes of other men” (Larrington 9). Níðhoggr itself is not described as being poisonous, though the latter part of its name “hogg” means “to strike” as seen in the term for a biting snake: “hoggormr.” The use of “q” is one of the slight differences between Old Icelandic and Modern Icelandic, this letter eventually developed into “ö” in Modern Icelandic.

The second variation on dragon poison is the exhalation of Lagarfljótsormurinn, previously discussed in the Worms and Serpents section. Lagarfljótsormurinn is described crawling out onto the shore of the fjord and breathing toxic plumes:

“...stundum teygðist hann upp á bakka fljótsins og gaus *eitri* ógurlega” (Árnason 641; emphasis added). This is a good example of a specific dragon ability that is described in a generic manner. A toxic plume is a vivid descriptor, but there are no technical details that can be identified. The audience understands that this dragon can kill without coming into physical contact with its victims, but precisely how it does so is left up to the audience’s imagination.

Jörmungandr, one of Loki’s monstrous children, is another variant of a poisonous dragon with little clarification or detail being provided as to that ability. Its Old Norse name of “Miðgarðsormr,” “the Midgarð serpent” in English, follows the translation presented in the previous section, with “ormr” being translated as “serpent” instead of “worm.” This terminology is no real obstacle given the close relationship of serpents and dragons previously discussed. There are some who hold Jörmungandr as an epitome of dragon-kind:

But it was especially in the Norse tales that the dragon-myth attained to its fullest development. Here, from the first, Jormungander lay in the depths of the ocean, girdling the middle world, dreaming as she waited of the twilight of the gods when she should slay and be slain by the mighty Thor. (Davis 169)

Davis’ assertion that Jörmungandr is the fullest developed dragon reinforces the statistics: the use of poison with Icelandic dragons was an important component. Not only is poison numerically frequent, it is also seen in particularly significant dragons.

Jörmungandr's poison seems slow-acting. Jörmungandr has already been killed by Thor, who takes nine steps then falls dead because of the poison "the serpent spits upon him" (Sturluson 73). It is not clear whether this poison is produced in a plume like Lagarfljótsormurinn or any other variation of delivery. Again, the poison itself is specifically strong enough to kill a god, but the text is also vague on how such a poison is administered.

Fáfnir, from *Völsunga saga*, produces a type of poison that is hard to characterize. This poison is exhaled, similarly to Lagarfljótsormurinn, but has a persistent effect that is meant to deter would-be attackers, though Sigurd manages to avoid the poison and slay Fáfnir. Shortly before Fáfnir is fatally stabbed he "blew poison over all the path before him" which is later clarified as a conscious decision (Byock 63). Fáfnir is one of the few dragons presented as being intelligent and capable of speech, and he uses his draconic abilities for certain purposes:

...ok svá fnýsta ek *eitri* alla vega frá mér í brott, at engi þorði at koma í nánd mér,
ok engi vápn hræddumst ek... (*Völsunga saga*; emphasis added)

...And I blew *poison* in all directions around me, so that none dared come near
me, and I feared no weapon. (Byock 64; emphasis added)

Fáfnir's poison is described in a similar manner to Lagarfljótsormurinn: the poison is exhaled rather than injected directly into a victim. What makes it hard to characterize is what is meant to be the deterring component of the poison. Why would people not dare

come near Fáfnir after he had blown such poison? It could be a persistent plume, or viscous drops that make the terrain and environment unsafe, but the text does not supply the answer.

My intention is to describe the physical attributes of Icelandic dragons, corroborated where possible with Icelandic art, but as these examples show, there is no information about the appearance or physical structure of the dragon that is associated with poison. The text uses terms such as “exhale” or “spit” that anatomically require the existence of lungs or cheeks. The verb “Fnýsta” does carry the connotation of exhaling through the nose, something absent in the English translation, but this does not inform us of the appearance of said nostril, snout, or head. This thesis is not meant to explain or apply any sort of logic behind how a dragon could perform such a feat such as producing poison, but to find any physical attributes that may be inferred with or attached to the use of poison.

Ultimately there are no tangible details to these poisonous exhalations that can provide insight to the Icelandic dragon’s appearance or structure, though poison is common in the sources. In addition, these dragons do not appear linked in a statistical manner to other descriptors in the way that wings and “dreki” are correlated. Three of the poisonous dragons are referred to as “dreki” and two as “ormur,” and there is no observable connection, or lack of one, between poison and any other descriptor. The use of poison as a descriptor lacks the depth that other descriptors have, and it appears that the only significance of this descriptor is that it is statistically common.

Contemporaneous art has been used elsewhere in the thesis to augment the information presented in literature. But art provides little information in regards to poison. Poison does not clearly appear in illuminations. Some dragons are shown exhaling something, but it cannot regularly be determined what is being exhaled. Given the lack of language-based information from the texts, and having no reliable art to consult, the use of poisonous dragons is only significant in how often it appears. It does not carry any information as to the appearance of the dragon. Although common, poison is a dead-end in describing the appearances of Icelandic dragons.

Conclusion

While poison may be a regular descriptor for Icelandic dragons, it provides little to no information about their physical appearance. Clearly, the draconic association with poison does not offer the same depth of information that other terms do. Unlike the nebulous use of poison, the terminology regarding the body, tails, and wings of Icelandic dragons is more detailed though not necessarily straightforward. These particular descriptors present a very specific image of Icelandic dragons through the use of nouns, adjectives, passive references, and poetic devices. The effect of these terms combined leaves the reader with a very vivid image, a snake-like body, with a whale tail, and feathered wings, though not all of these features may appear at once.

3. The Whole Dragon

Up to this stage, I have analyzed Icelandic dragons by their component parts, as described in Icelandic texts, reinforced by visual examples of the descriptors. This chapter aims to inspect how the Icelandic dragon functions as whole while keeping the context of their component parts in mind. While my identification of the individual components of Icelandic dragons serves an important purpose, dragons are not simply the sum of their parts. Examining a whole Icelandic dragon as it exists as a cultural symbol, instead of the living creature it had been considered so far, shows that the dragon can be a powerful and dominating entity. It gains that power through the combination of multiple elements and contextual folklore.

The pursuit of understanding the whole, as well as the component parts, is similar to the pursuit of medieval alchemists, who used dragons to “illustrate the state of *putrefactio* (separating the elements or psychic disintegration)” throughout medieval Europe (Cirlot 87). The alchemic theory of the separation of elements, breaking an object down to its base parts, was represented by a chimeric, and therefore composite, entity. Additionally, whether or not the alchemists’ symbolic dragon was winged identified whether the substance was considered a volatile or fixed element (Cirlot 87).

So far I have followed a similar method to putrefaction by breaking these dragons down into their base parts, their bodies, tails, and wings. Now I would like to reverse the

method, and to consider Icelandic dragons not just as simple chimeras, but as entities whose components act synergistically to bestow power.

Each creature that has been the origin of a descriptor used for Icelandic dragons is a dominant entity in its own right and terrain: bird wings for the sky (from eagles or kites); “sporðr” for water (from sharks, whales, or seals); and serpentine chassis for earth (from snakes, serpents, or worms). The appeal of these donor creatures is reasonably clear. They are either powerful predators (e.g., eagles and sharks) in their domain, or simply the largest (e.g., whales). Snakes and worms may seem less evocative choices when compared to the animals of the other elements, but they are closely associated with the regenerative powers of the earth in multiple mythologies. Antaeus, a Greek wrestler found in the story of Heracles, was born of the earth and could therefore not die while touching the ground. The association between dragons and the earth is not formally stated in Norse myths but it would not be a large stretch for them to be linked. Níðhoggr is said to live beneath Yggdrasil, the world tree, and chew on the roots, which does not necessitate a subterranean life but certainly connotes an earthy habitat. There is also a Christian connection of serpents and the earth. Earlier discussed in the section on Worms and Serpents, the serpent from the garden was commanded to live on its belly and consume dust. Because of this connection between earth and serpents, along with the dominance of the other donor animals, even a dragon that is merely the sum of its parts is a strong and evocative entity.

Icelandic folklore offers a wide range of unique creatures, but one example in particular cements this idea that strength can be represented through the combination of animal forms that characterizes Icelandic dragons. The folktale of Thorgeir's Bull tells of some bored magicians, led by Thorgeir, who decide to create a powerful undead bull to amuse themselves. After killing and skinning the bull, the magicians cram various spells into the bull and then bring it back to life (Bedell 205). Part of these spells were the imburement of spirits of other entities, which were:

...a bird, a dog, a cat, a mouse, a man, two sea animals, and the air. When they were finished, the bull had nine different spirits forces living inside him, the ninth being his own cattle spirit. (Bedell 205)

This bull was immensely strong because of the spirits or natures that it possessed, and it could take on the form of any of them. An additional spell of invulnerability was added as an extra layer of insurance, because Thorgeir could not be certain of the bull's invulnerability (Simpson 178). The story continues and covers several deaths caused by the bull, a couple of attempts to kill it or drive it off, and ultimately ends with the note that while Thorgeir did not destroy the bull before he died, the bull has rarely been seen since.

Thorgeir's bull reinforces the idea of strength through combination. All of the power the bull has comes from the different creatures bound to it. However, there is a difference between dragons and the bull: dragons derive their strength through their physical combination of animal components, whereas the bull has the spirits of many

different creatures, making it a spiritual chimera of sorts. The difference in components is not of significant consequence, as ultimately the method and result are similar - an entity becomes stronger the more foreign entities it incorporates into itself.

Dragons appear as powerful creatures based only on their physical attributes. Combining the chimeric nature of the dragon with the symbiotic connection between dragons and wealth creates a figure of domination. Dragons repeatedly appear as illuminations in manuscripts of *Jónsbók*, which is a compilation of Icelandic commonwealth era laws and rules, and so contains no legendary, heroic sagas, or any other texts in which one would normally expect to see a dragon. My timeline includes six illuminations of dragons from five manuscripts containing *Jónsbók*, which are all dated to the period between c. 1300 and 1400. Of the thirteen dragon illuminations charted in Table 1, roughly half came from manuscripts of *Jónsbók*. This frequency suggests dragon illuminations were significant to the text.

The repeated appearance of draconic illuminations could be explained by illumination cycles in which a manuscript's contents, text, and style of illuminations are copied. These illumination cycles do not create perfect replicas of the original but the replication is meant to be comparable. If the first popular copy of *Jónsbók* had dragon illuminations and began an illumination cycle as it was copied, and then its copies were copied, this could explain why there are so many copies of *Jónsbók* with dragons. However, even if these illuminations were mindlessly replicated, the original genesis of these dragons accompanying laws requires explanation.

Jonathan Evans believes there is a connection between the text and the illuminations:

When the sixteenth-century scribe who wrote and illustrated Heynesbók (a manuscript containing *Jónsbók*) employed a dragon to decorate the first letter of the chapter on inheritance, he drew upon an iconographic tradition that enabled him to demonstrate an awareness of the social implications of the legal issues touched upon in the text. By choosing the dragon as a symbol of his social concerns, he relied upon widely-held cultural associations relating the dragon to the concept of greed. (Evans 491)

Evans believes that the cultural knowledge of a dragon's greed, and the problems associated with avarice, would serve as both a reminder and warning when it came to the topic of inheritance. Given the existence of manuscripts containing *Jónsbók* that are dated 200 years earlier than Heynesbók, the scribe may have been continuing the cycle of illuminations, rather than starting one. However, the choice to draw on the knowledge of a dragon's avarice was made by at least one of the scribes at some point, and that choice is what matters.

Evans' explanation relies on the bond that gold and dragons have, one best described as symbiotic even though one side is inanimate. In Icelandic folk stories and Nordic mythology, dragons grow larger and their abilities are enhanced by the presence of gold, as seen with Lagarfljótsormurinn, which grew from a snake into a dragon because it was kept in the proximity of gold. Gold, on the other hand, magically replicates and becomes a more valuable hoard in the presence of a dragon. Even for

humans, gold is a powerful possession because holding more wealth means more power—especially more power to buy what one wants: objects; services; or even people. The symbolism of a dragon’s hoard is clear: wealth equals power.¹³ This idea can also be found in *Ragnar’s saga*, where the dragon slayer enjoys fame, wealth, and marriage after killing the dragon. The idea is seen again in *Völsunga saga*, Fáfnir’s wealth is turned into influential power by the dragon-slayer, though there are complications that come with such power (Byock 72). Such a strong bond between dragons and the control of wealth would easily remind the reader of *Jónsbók* the perils of hoarding, especially given the context of inheritance laws. *Völsunga saga* presents the consequences of hoarding very clearly as Fáfnir’s wealth is primarily based on the weregild of his brother, which he forcefully inherited from his father. Inheritance, wealth, and power, are essential concepts to *Völsunga saga*.

Another common theme for dragons is that they regularly appear in a context of dominance: dominance over people, such as Fáfnir’s famous ægishjálmur or helm of awe; dominance over riches (possessiveness of gold and hoarding behavior, as well as inheritance); and even dominance through physical power. The use as a symbol of dominance fits with the trend of dragon illuminations in *Jónsbók*. Dominance could be understood as sovereignty as both terms imply ownership. This view of ownership may be more relevant historically, as the use of bonded servants and slaves, both of which were considered possessions, was a common practice throughout the medieval period in

¹³ More can be read about the social workings of wealth hoarding in “The Dragon’s Treasure in ‘Beowulf’” by Paul Taylor.

Iceland and surrounding regions. Thus a dragon illumination in a law book like *Jónsbók* would make sense, if the dragon was understood to be a symbol representing ideas like dominion, sovereignty, or possession, especially given its complex, chimeric nature.

The power that Icelandic dragons demonstrate is layered in nature, but certainly observable as the whole dragon is perceived. Dragons are constructed from features of powerful animals, and as a whole being are further enhanced in a cultural context of wealth. In this context dragons can be seen as symbol of dominance in Icelandic culture.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the physical appearance of Icelandic dragons as revealed in texts from the medieval period in Iceland. Illustrations, sculptures, and carvings provided corroborating information. The comparison and contrast between what is described in the literature and what is portrayed in the art demonstrates that certain dragon traits denote specific meanings. In some cases, the art suggests certain interpretations or translations of the text, while in others the text provides the context for understanding the art. Sometimes, the juxtaposition of dragon-art, be it an illumination or carving, alongside a dragon-text allows a more detailed interpretation, as seen in the discussion about “ormur,” as well as the use of feathered wings. Both types of sources are required to fully explain the various features seen or described. For example, manuscript art corroborated the precise translation of “sporðr” that entails a specific shape and appearance. Likewise, being able to look at representations of dragons with feathered wings, occasionally in the same frame as birds, confirms the linguistic use of feathers. This analysis provided significant new insights into our understanding of Icelandic dragons.

Old Icelandic language is very close to the modern tongue, spoken and written, but there are still issues when texts are translated from one to the other, or into other languages. In some cases, the context or connotation behind certain terms, such as the visual elements of “sporðr” or the use of feathered wings, is stripped away in the translation. By identifying these translational inaccuracies or mistakes, and showing what

descriptive information was missed or lost, I hope to safeguard against future laxness in translating the descriptions of these creatures. For example, the Old Icelandic word “sporðr” clearly describes a certain silhouette or shape associated with the tail while the word “fjöðrum” describes a particular kind of feathered wing. Both words carry specific definitions in the language.

Working with Icelandic dragons, as reassembled creatures, also serves two academic purposes. The first purpose is to support the preservation of historic knowledge. A more comprehensive understanding of dragons, not just the dragon-slayers or how the dragon functions as a story telling component, is useful for other academics in the field. By highlighting the unique or shared descriptors of dragons, the knowledge of these creatures is preserved for others to study, instead of being lost or transmogrified by translations that fail to capture the specific diction used in the Icelandic language. Secondly, the descriptive material shows that previous attempts of a global phylogeny of dragons, such as Robert Blust's, do not delve as deeply as they should have into specific national traditions, though they do cover an impressive breadth. While focusing on the dragons in one particular geographical area does yield more insight than a cursory examination, Blust missed significant elements that would make the Icelandic dragon more distinguished. Using the information discussed here to update or revise such assumptions, or misinformation, would certainly contribute to a new global perspective of Icelandic Dragons. Blust did not include Iceland in his account of places where

dragons with feathered wings appeared, and aquatic tails do not appear in any geographical region, according to him.

Additionally, dragons proved to not only be chimerical in an anatomical sense, but also in a cultural and symbolic sense. Assembled from their donor animals, these dragons are more than the sum of their parts, they are used to signify or represent beliefs. They are the villain to be slain by the dragon slayer but also a symbol of the social evil of greed and hoarding wealth. Dragons can also appear as a manifestation of dominance.

Together, this information presents the Icelandic dragon as being contrary, not only to Blust's descriptions, but to some conventional wisdom as well. To amend said wisdom would first involve increasing the level of detail put into translating Icelandic texts. Presenting these unique dragons that are part of Icelandic sagas and Norse mythology with their specific descriptions would better reflect the intricacies of the source material. Secondly, the new information regarding fish and whale tails, and feathered wings could support a revised approach to mapping dragons by geography, as Blust did. Using this approach to dragons elsewhere could find specific descriptors that have similarly been mistranslated or ignored. Finally, I take inspiration from Charles Darwin, who said "To kill an error is as good a service as, and sometimes even better than, the establishing of a new truth or fact" (Darwin). The information presented here could be used to challenge certain errors that appear to be maintained at an institutional level and change the dragon appearing on the Icelandic heraldry to one possessing feathered wings, which would better reflect its origin.

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