

Raiders from the North: Irish Enslavement during the Viking Age



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A thesis submitted for graduation with honors from the department of Anthropology

University of Colorado Boulder

Defended March 28th, 2016

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Abstract:

In the Early and High Middle Ages the Vikings began to travel and raid across Europe and the Atlantic. During these expeditions the Vikings captured many people whom they enslaved or sold into the slave-trade. For the western portion of the Viking Expansion, many of the enslaved were Irish. The enslavement of the Irish by the Norse continued through the end of the Viking Age and occurred not only in the British Isles but also in Iceland. The process of the Viking Expansion and enslavement of the Irish influenced Norse culture and social identity.

This thesis will explore the Norse narrative in the Atlantic and analyze changes in culture and social identity as a result of Irish interactions and enslavement. A combination of primary, secondary and archaeological sources will be utilized. There will be a thorough discussion of Scandinavia and Ireland prior to the Viking Age, emphasizing their political and cultural states as well as previous forms of enslavement. Then there will be a description of the Viking Age in Ireland. Interactions between the Irish and the Norse will be analyzed as well as the enslavement of the Irish during this time. The thesis will conclude with an analysis of Iceland, which is the culminating location for Irish-Norse interactions and cultural change.

Both the interactions with the Irish as well as the enslavement of the Irish influenced Norse culture. Neither culture completely melded with the other, however, a hybrid culture emerged that maintained its Scandinavian origins while embracing its new Irish influences. This culture included many Norse traditions, such as *Things*, burials, lawmaking, and Norse-styled clothing, while incorporating the Irish style of poetry, folklore, and language. In Iceland, a new Norse-Irish identity emerged.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank first and foremost my advisor Dr. Catherine Cameron, for working so closely with me all year and giving me such wonderful feedback on all of my *very* rough drafts. It took some patience to work all through my hectic ideas and keep me motivated throughout the year. It was not easy but very much appreciated! I would also like to thank my other two committee members, Dr. Carla Jones and Dr. Benjamin Teitelbaum, for giving me their time, assistance, and draft feedback.

My family and friends have given me so much support and positive energy throughout this entire process. My mother, my roommate, my boyfriend and Alythea have been especially supportive and if it wasn't for all of you this never would have been written.

And to all of my Viking and Irish ancestors: this one is for you.

Chapter I: Introduction



Figure 1: Painting of a Viking Ship

During the Early and High Middle Ages the Vikings moved out of Scandinavia and explored Europe for raiding and conquest. As the Norse travelled into the British Isles, they began capturing and enslaving the Irish. This process has prompted the question that the thesis will address: how did the Viking Expansion in Ireland and enslavement of the Irish influence Norse culture and social identity?

There is a lack of scholarship on the lowest strata of most societies, including and especially slaves. Archaeology is often the study of the rich and powerful. It is true that the remains of society's elite often last in the archaeological record much longer than the common or

lower classes, largely due to their monumental architecture and other durable structures. It is also true, however, that usually it is the archaeology of the wealthy and the powerful that people find most interesting. This is why excavations are more likely to be publicized if there will be an exploration of a castle, palace, or temple, rather than slave quarters or the small homes of commoners. When flipping through television channels there are many shows and episodes on the Pharaohs and Pyramids of Egypt, China's Emperors and the Great Wall, and even King Henry VIII's six wives. Conversely, how many are there on the farmers, merchants, commoners, and slaves of those eras and civilizations? The impoverished and enslaved have been silenced in archaeology and history much as they were during their lifetimes. Societal and cultural change does not only occur through changes in leadership or wealth, it can also come from the common people and even the lowest members of a society. It is important to study slaves and the lower strata for these reasons.

During the Viking Expansion, the Norse raided many communities and took many captives with them, some of whom were sold into the slave trade or became the slaves of the Norse. One of the key locations for Viking captive-taking was Ireland. Eventually, the Norse founded permanent settlements in Ireland and Iceland that not only consisted of Norse invaders, but also some enslaved Irish people. The aim of this thesis is to explore how the process of Irish enslavement influenced Norse culture and identity. The thesis utilizes primary sources, secondary sources, and archaeological data to study Norse culture, Irish enslavement and changes in Norse social identity. There are five chapters organized chronologically so that influences on culture and identity can be seen in association with other changes during a particular time frame. This chapter includes a brief history of the Viking Age and Expansion, discussions of relevant terms used in the thesis, an analysis of the types of sources used, and a

brief discussion of the contents of the following four chapters. The thesis focuses entirely on the western portion of the Viking Expansion emphasizing Norway, Denmark, the British Isles and Iceland.

During the Viking Expansion, there were significant changes in Norse culture and identity. The Norse did not necessarily merge into the existing Irish Celtic culture, but actually were part of a hybrid culture that acknowledged Scandinavian origins while embracing the new geography, culture, and religion of Ireland.

The Chronology and Terminology of the Viking Age:

The following is a brief history of medieval Scandinavians and the Viking Expansion in Western Europe. It provides context for the argument of the thesis and emphasizes events and themes that are directly relevant to this topic. The information given shows the separation between Pre-Viking Age, Viking Age, and post-Viking Age. It is important to understand these distinctions, as well as the distinctions between Scandinavia, the British Isles and Iceland, because the thesis is organized chronologically and, in many ways, geographically. Most of the following events are discussed in further detail in other chapters of the thesis. In addition to the historical overview, important terminology used throughout the thesis is defined.

The two terms should be clarified: the *Viking Expansion* was the process of Scandinavians travelling abroad to raid and settle across Europe and the Atlantic, while the *Viking Age* is a historical era that marks the most important dates of the Expansion. It is important to note that this is in no way an intensive historical overview of the Viking Age.

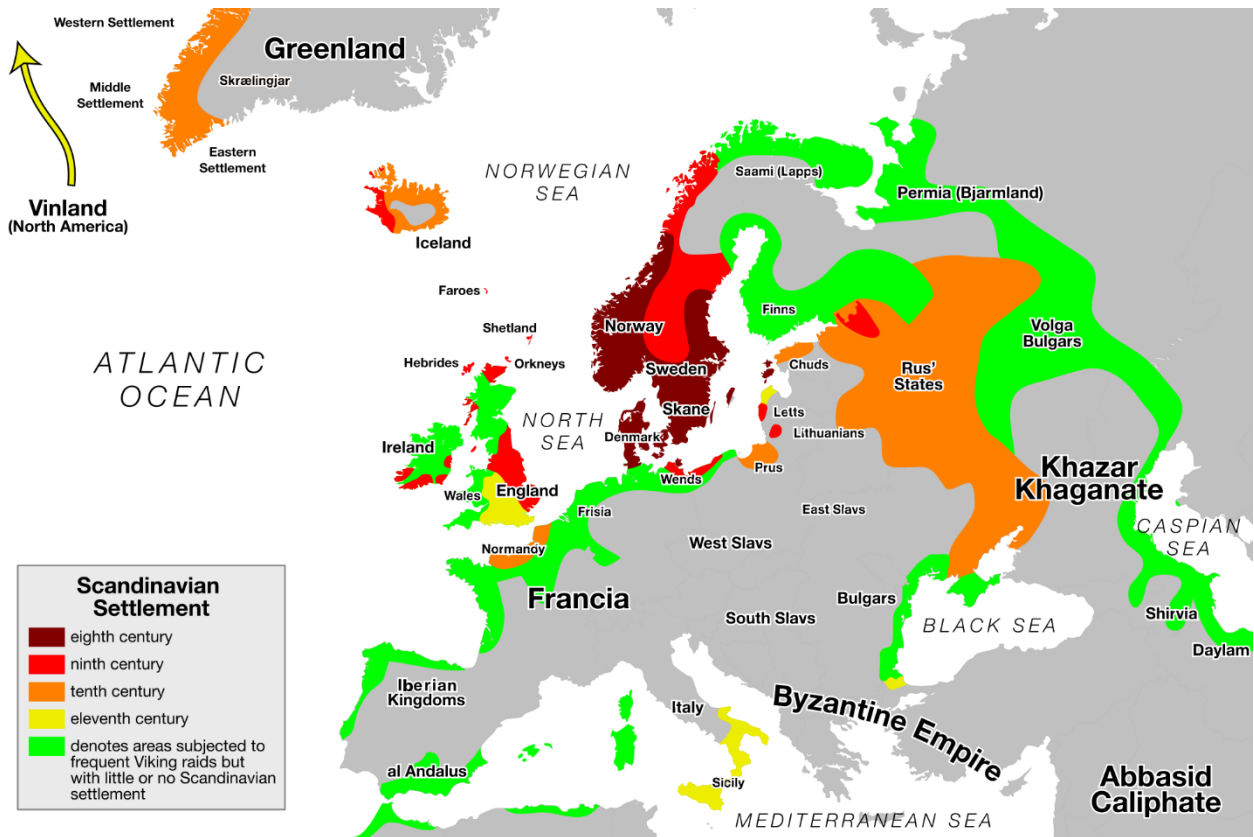


Figure 2: Map of the Viking Expansion

The Viking Expansion:

The Viking Age began in 793 C.E. with the attack and raid of the monastery on Lindisfarne, a small island on the Northeast coast of Northumbria, England. Prior to this there has been some evidence of Scandinavians travelling abroad and trading around the year 700 which may have been some of the first interactions the Scandinavians had with the people of the British Isles.¹ The Vikings raided and explored as far east as Russia, as far south as Byzantium, and as far West as North America. They had a political and cultural impact wherever they

¹ Stefan Brink, "Introduction," in *The Viking World*, n.d., 1–3.

travelled. While raids may have initially begun with a simple desire to gain wealth, this quickly gave way to migration and the settlement of new regions by the middle of the 9th century.²

After settlement in the British Isles was well underway, the Vikings began to explore the Atlantic. First Iceland, then Greenland and finally North America. The first settlement in Iceland was created at Reykjavik (Iceland's modern capital), in the year 874. One of the most important dates for Nordic history is Viking Christianization, which occurred around 1000 throughout Scandinavia, Europe and the Atlantic.³

The Viking Age ended in 1066 with the Battle of Stamford Bridge in England. After this event almost all Viking conflict ceased in the British Isles and the Viking culture merged with the English and Irish shortly afterwards.⁴

The "Viking Age":

The thesis frequently uses the term "Viking Age." Therefore, it is important to explain why this time period has been defined as a significant era in medieval European history. The general consensus by historians is that the Viking Age began in 793 at Lindisfarne and ended in 1066 at Stamford Bridge.⁵ Although, there are some scholars who argue for different dates to define the Viking Age. Some claim the Age began around 700 when Scandinavians began travelling outside of Scandinavia for trade, and ended with the Vikings converting to Christianity around the year 1000.⁶ These dates are significant because the Scandinavians began to have

² Stefan Brink, "Introduction," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–3.

³ Robert Kellogg, Various, and Jane Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*: (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), xix.

⁴ Stefan Brink, "Who Were the Vikings?," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 4–5.

⁵ Brink, "Introduction," n.d., 1–3.

⁶ Brink, "Who Were the Vikings?," 4–5.

larger cultural impacts on Europe after they began trading across the region. It may have been their involvement in trade that initially encouraged the shift from trading to raiding. The Christianization of the Vikings is another important milestone in Nordic history since it had a large impact on Viking culture. According to some sources, the Norse began to integrate into the British and Irish cultures more completely after this process. The Vikings were more willing to incorporate Irish traditions into their own lives and also more accepted by the Irish community. While it is important to see these events as major markers in medieval Europe, this thesis will use the former breakdown of the Viking Age (793-1066). Not only is it more accepted by the academic community, but it also better fits the topic and purpose of the thesis.

Defining “Viking,” “Scandinavian,” and “Norse”:

There are three terms used to describe the people of Scandinavia and their descendants: “Scandinavian,” “Norse,” and “Viking.” The word “Scandinavian” denotes anyone who comes from Scandinavia, or the three modern countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. “Norse” is a term used for any regions where medieval Scandinavians settled and where the dominant culture became Scandinavian. These countries include Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Åland, as well as Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The word “Viking,” however, can be problematic. In medieval Europe, the Scandinavians were referred to as “Northmen,” “pagans,” or “Danes,” not as Vikings. There is no definitive origin or meaning behind the word. It seems to come from the Old Norse word “Vikingr,” which in its masculine form means “sea warrior,” and in its feminine form means “military expedition,” particularly one over sea.⁷ Many historians avoid using the

⁷ Ibid., 6–8.

word “Viking” to refer to all of the medieval Norse people and culture because the majority of medieval Scandinavians did not participate in sea voyages and raids in Europe. Therefore it is not an adequate term to be used for the general population. There are other historians, however, who support the use of the term “Viking.” The unique nature of Scandinavian exploration made such a large impact on both the Scandinavian and European cultures that it is essential to differentiate the society of this time from other time periods.⁸ For this reason, the term “Viking” is utilized in this thesis to denote the Scandinavian culture that explored and raided Europe during the Viking Age.

“Slaves,” “Thralls” and other terms used for the un-free:

It is important to distinguish between several terms used for the un-free in medieval Europe. This thesis uses Orlando Patterson’s definition of enslavement: “slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.”⁹ For the Norse, the worst punishment was to be ex-communicated and outlawed from society.¹⁰ Similar to most societies, slaves were separated from the rest of the community.¹¹ In fact, to the Vikings slaves were considered to be genealogically different from their masters, even if they were of the same ethnicity. In other words, slaves did not have a genealogical lineage. Sometimes slavery was even punishment for certain crimes. Viking slaves were unfree because they had been captured and taken away from their family, forced to labor for another household or community. In Nordic studies, the term “thrall” is often used for slaves. The word “thrall” is an Old Norse

⁸ Brink, “Introduction,” n.d., 6–8.

⁹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

¹⁰ Stefan Brink, “Slavery in the Viking Age,” in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 49–53.

¹¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, c1988., 98–100.

word meaning “male slave,” while “ambatt” describes a female slave. The Vikings had several words used to describe slaves with special jobs and abilities and there does not appear to be any one word in Old Norse that describes all slaves at once. During and after the Viking Age, the Norse began to use words that usually described foreigners to define slaves. For example, the word “Valir” described the Celts, and later Celtic slaves.¹² Due to the variety and uncertainty of Old Norse words describing slaves, this thesis will only use the term “slave” to refer to the unfree in the Viking Age.

Note on Sources and their Limitations:

Because of the nature of the material available to me, this thesis relies heavily on secondary sources, although I also use a few primary sources. In the following section I discuss the sources used for my research and emphasize their importance to this topic as well as some of their limitations.

Sources Used:

The primary sources used in the thesis are of two types. The first is Irish and Nordic mythology and folklore, and the second is historical documents such as laws, English and Irish annals, and an account by Ibn Fadlān, an Arab traveler. Irish and Nordic mythology will not be used as direct evidence for slavery during the Viking Age because stories such as these cannot be taken literally. However, mythology and folklore can give valuable insights into a culture’s

¹² Brink, “Slavery in the Viking Age,” 49–56.

beliefs about themselves and the world around them. More importantly, these stories change and evolve after contact with other cultures and stories from other groups. Exploring the ways in which these stories changed after the Viking Expansion may give some insight into how the Norse culture and the Irish culture influenced one another. Two of these sources are the *Poetic Edda* and the Icelandic Sagas. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of Old Norse poems found from an Icelandic manuscript called the *Codex Regius* written in the late 13th century. It is possibly the single most important source for Old Norse mythology. The Icelandic Sagas are stories written in Iceland that describe the genealogical lineage and lives of several significant individuals as well as local Icelandic history.

The second type of primary source, historical records, will be taken more literally as evidence for enslavement practices. These are sources such as laws, British and Irish annals, and traveler's accounts. They are especially appropriate for examining certain aspects of Viking culture, but do not give serious insight into Viking identity. For example, Ibn Fadlān has one of the few historical accounts ever written of a Viking ship burial.¹³ This source can be taken more literally than a myth or story, but there is no discussion of Viking identity or other aspects of Viking culture because it only describes burial practices. Fadlān's account is also one from an outsider, someone who likely had inherent biases and may not have actually witnessed the entire ceremony due to his status as an outsider. Two more examples of this type of source are British and Irish Annals and the *Landnámabók*. Annals are records of events that occurred in a given year. Only Annals from the British Isles will be used in this thesis. *Landnámabók*, or the *Book of Settlements*, is an Icelandic manuscript that describes in detail Icelandic settlement during the 9th

¹³ Ahmad Ibn Fadlān, Paul Lunde, and Caroline Stone, *Ibn Fadlan and the Land of Darkness: Arab Travellers in the Far North*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 47–53.

and 10th centuries. Both of these sources are valuable for understanding the chronology of events in Ireland and Iceland during the Viking Age.

While there are analyses of a few primary sources, the majority of this thesis considers secondary sources. The secondary sources are used to give insights into the primary sources that are otherwise unavailable to me, such as certain Icelandic Sagas that have not been translated into English and archaeological excavations in Europe that lack readily available reports. One of the most important secondary sources for this thesis is Ruth Mazo Karras' *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*. Karras utilizes many primary sources such as provincial laws and the Icelandic Sagas to analyze slavery in Viking society. This is a valuable source for my research because Karras addresses several Icelandic Sagas that were not available to me and gives in depth analyzes of law codes that contain content I would not have had access to otherwise. Another important source is *The Viking World*, a volume of essays on Viking history and culture organized by Stefan Brink. This source gave me a variety of scholars and essays on many topics that aided my research. The essays in this volume used primary sources such as Rígsþula, Icelandic Sagas, Norse and Irish folklore, law codes and archaeological data. *Anglo-Saxon-Irish Relations before the Vikings* by James Graham-Campbell and has also proven to be a valuable source for this thesis because of the detailed research presented on Ireland prior to the Viking Age, a topic I found otherwise difficult to research.

Source Limitations:

There are several important limitations to the sources used for this thesis. One limitation is the difficulty of this particular topic. There are few primary sources that discuss medieval slavery. The slaves that are the topic of this thesis were a marginalized people that lived a

millennia ago. There are few historical records or stories that mention slaves and few slaves have been identified in the archaeological record, because of poor preservatives of graves.¹⁴ Tracking slaves through the slave trade has also been difficult.¹⁵ Since the archaeological record of Scandinavian slavery is limited, written sources are primarily used in this thesis. However, archaeology does provide fleeting glimpses of enslaved people and those cases will be used where appropriate.¹⁶

Some of the available sources were written years (often a century or two) after the events described. This is particularly the case with the Icelandic Sagas.¹⁷ Although the Sagas have a basis in actual historical events and persons, their accuracy is sometimes questionable. Occasionally, records of the Viking Age were not only written centuries after the Age had ended, but were also written by Christians who wanted to portray the Vikings as a savage people. Some early accounts of the Viking culture were written by men such as Adam of Bremen, who only travelled to certain parts of Scandinavia and documented their culture in order show Christians how barbaric the Vikings were.¹⁸ There were the other Christians who wrote of the terror the pagans caused on the British Isles, and there were Arab travelers who documented the Viking Expansion extensively (one of which will be discussed in this thesis), as well as the British and Irish Annals of countries that were invaded by the Vikings. Due to the biases outsiders' reports of the Vikings, these sources cannot necessarily be taken literally, just as a source written years after the events it describes should not be taken literally. While there may be some clear

¹⁴ Lotte Hedeager, "Scandinavia before the Viking Age," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 11–15.

¹⁵ Egon Wamers, "Insular Finds in Viking Age Scandinavia and the State Formation of Norway," in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 37.

¹⁶ Mary A. Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland: Settlement, Trade and Urbanization* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2008), 89.

¹⁷ Kellogg, Various, and Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*.

¹⁸ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 71.

limitations to the primary sources used in this thesis, the sources included were all chosen because their strengths outweighed their weaknesses. For example, although the Icelandic Sagas were written several centuries after the events they describe take place, and many include supernatural or magical events, they are still stories based on factual events and were written to preserve Icelandic history and culture. In this way, some of the more credible events in the Sagas can be trusted as at least somewhat truthful and more than that, the overall themes and depictions of Icelandic culture and society can give valuable insights into medieval Iceland.

Another limitation of my research is language. There are many sources that are not available in English; most of these are written in Gaelic or Old Norse and I was unable to find a scholar nearby who could help translate them. These sources have therefore been omitted from the research and will, as a result, limit my research. There are also concerns even with the sources available in English since I must put complete reliance on another person's translation and interpretation of a text. This can be a problem since the decisions made in translating are sometimes controversial and lack general consensus. This is especially true in the field of Scandinavian studies where the terminology is extremely important and a choice in the translation of a particular word can change the entire meaning of a text. I did not attempt a critical analysis of these translations, but accepted them as they were.

Organization of the Thesis:

The thesis is separated into five chapters organized chronologically. This organization is ideal for examining a sequence of historical events involving Irish enslavement and how the influence of these events on Norse culture build over time. Each chapter ends with a primary

source that is important to the overall argument of the thesis and summarizes that particular chapter's primary objective. Chapter 2 is an overview of Ireland and Scandinavia before and into the early Viking Age. This is necessary to understand how Scandinavian culture changes during the Expansion. It ends with a discussion of burial practices before and during the Viking Age, particularly those that include slaves. Chapter 3 discusses the Viking Expansion focusing on accounts of raids and contact between the Norse and the Irish. There is an analysis of the enslavement of the Irish by the Norse and how this influenced the existing Norse culture. This chapter ends with a discussion of the *Rígsþula*, an Eddic Poem that is important to the study of Norse social strata. Chapter 4 focuses on Iceland and its unique settlement of both Norse and Irish Celtic peoples that sets it apart from other areas in Europe. It ends with a discussion of the Icelandic Sagas, one of the most important primary sources available for slaves in Iceland. Chapter 5 concludes the following argument: the Viking Expansion in Ireland impacted Norse culture. While certain aspects of Norse culture did not change, such as political assemblies and clothing, interactions with the Irish during the Viking Age lead to changes in Norse literature and poetry. The enslavement of the Irish in Ireland and Iceland lead to hybrid families and communities. As a result of this process, Icelandic identity is one that maintains its Norse origins but embraces its new Irish heritage.

Chapter II: Scandinavia and Ireland before and during the Early Viking Age

The following chapter presents an analysis of Scandinavia and Ireland before and during the early the Viking Age. There is limited material available for this time period, but as much information as possible has been included. This chapter is necessary to show the influence of the Viking Expansion and Irish slaves on Norse culture. It is divided into three sections. The first, Society and Enslavement in Pre-Expansion Scandinavia, discusses Scandinavian society and enslavement practices from the earliest sources available to the beginning of the Expansion. There is a discussion of the sources and descriptions of early Germanic and Scandinavian society, enslavement in Scandinavia, and a small section on Scandinavian law. The second section of this chapter, Society and Enslavement in Pre-Invasion Ireland and England, gives a very brief analysis of Ireland during this period describing its history, political state, and previous times of enslavement. This section is significantly shorter than the Scandinavian section since this thesis is about the change of Norse culture, so only the information about Ireland that is significant to this particular argument will be presented. The chapter concludes with Burials and Human Sacrifice in Scandinavia and the British Isles. There is a description of several burials that possibly contain slaves and the implications these burials give about Norse culture and mortuary practices during the Viking Age. This is an excellent end point for this chapter because it not only is relevant to the time period this chapter discusses but also leads into the time period discussed in the following chapter.

Society and Enslavement in Pre-Expansion Scandinavia:

This section divided into three topics. The first, Early Germanic Culture in Northern Europe and Southern Scandinavia, examines some of the oldest documents available that describe the earliest Germanic and Scandinavian cultures. Even though some of these sources are hundreds of years older than the Viking Age, there is still value in studying them because they describe some of the earliest people and culture of Scandinavia. The second topic, Early Scandinavian Enslavement, describes what little is known about slavery in Scandinavia prior to the Viking Expansion. Finally, the third topic discusses early Scandinavian Law. Scandinavians had a great passion for law-making before, during and after the Viking Age and much about Norse culture can be deduced from looking at them.

Early Germanic Culture in Northern Europe and Southern Scandinavia:

There are few sources and little archaeological evidence to determine the identities of the Scandinavians and the Irish prior to the Viking Expansion. At times it is difficult to even distinguish what events and beliefs occurred in Scandinavia before or during the Viking Age. Some of the oldest evidence historians have for early Germanic and Scandinavian culture is in Tacitus' *Germania*. This is the culture that existed in Northern Europe and southern Scandinavia before eventually moving into central and north Scandinavia. It is therefore the origin to Scandinavia's culture and language prior to the Viking Age. In the year 98 C.E. a Roman named Publius Cornelius Tacitus wrote what is now known as an ethnography of the Germanic tribes that lived outside of the Roman Empire. Although Tacitus describes a culture that existed centuries prior to the Viking Age, it can be a valuable source for very early Scandinavian culture

and enslavement in southern Scandinavia. In *Germania*, Tacitus gives a very thorough breakdown of the Germanic culture from physical appearances to political assembly. Tacitus states the vast majority of the Germanic people were yellow or red haired. Society was somewhat egalitarian and freemen would gather together to speak their minds at public assemblies, which very much resembles the medieval *Things*. Tacitus also claims that slaves in early Germanic societies were treated better than contemporary Roman slaves and that these slaves more resembled hutted slaves rather than Roman slaves. Hutted slaves were slaves who owned their own home, land to grow crops, and were even able sell these crops for profit to accumulate enough wealth to buy their own freedom.¹⁹ There are several strengths and weaknesses to Tacitus' work. Some of the cultural traditions he present can be corroborated in later Germanic Laws, while others cannot. Tacitus had intended to portray the Germans as noble savages for his Roman audience and may have exaggerated what he saw. However, there is chance that certain traditions changed in the hundreds of years between Tacitus' ethnography and the time the Germanic Laws were written. Although, the majority of what he wrote can be supported in Germanic laws five or six centuries later.²⁰ It is clear, however, that slave treatment in the centuries after Tacitus was much crueler than Tacitus describes.²¹ Tacitus and his work, *Germania*, have been included in this thesis because of Tacitus' valuable description of Germanic slaves. While the status of the slaves described in *Germania* is not very similar to the status of slaves shortly before the Viking Age in Scandinavia, the flexible social mobility and a

¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁰ Noel Lenski, "Captivity, Slavery, and Cultural Exchange between Rome and the Germans from the First to the Seventh Century CE," in *Invisible Citizens: Captives and Their Consequences* (Foundations of archaeological inquiry, 2008), 94.

²¹ Ibid., 100.

slave's ability to buy their own freedom is something that can be found for centuries after Tacitus wrote his ethnography.

Early Scandinavian Enslavement:

In medieval Scandinavian society, leaders were chosen by their actions, not by their heritage or genealogy.²² There was never any distinct hierarchy that remained unchangeable and kept families in their class strata for centuries with no hope of a different situation. The social structure was somewhat fluid making marriage and movement between strata quite easy compared to other contemporary European societies.

Slavery was fairly common in Scandinavian society before and during the Viking Age, although slaves never composed of a large portion of the population. Most slaves were owned by the kings and nobles, however, there were some middle class farms that held a few slaves. While slaves were a common social person in Scandinavia, the fact that they were mostly owned by the very wealthy and powerful suggests that slavery was not a large part of pre-Expansion Scandinavian economics and culture. The royalty and nobles held slaves as a status symbol and an indication of their wealth while some homesteads were fortunate enough to have slaves and use them to increase their productivity. There were, however, many homesteads that had no slaves which means that slaves, while still desirable, were not necessarily needed to sustain a productive farm at this time.²³

²² Mary Wilhelmine Williams, *Social Scandinavia in the Viking Age* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1920), 34.

²³ *Ibid.*, 34–37.

In the centuries prior to the Viking Age, there were several different ways in which an individual could fall into enslavement in Scandinavia. The first is when someone is born into slavery, meaning that both of their parents were slaves so therefore their children were born slaves. In Scandinavia slave owners often would expose the new-born infants of slaves to die so there were very few individuals who became slaves this way. Most of the slave population was replenished through purchasing and capturing more people rather than breeding.²⁴ This was the most common way for a person to become enslaved in Scandinavia. Some individuals were purchased by foreign slave merchants to be sold into slavery or, during the Expansion, captured in Viking raids and foreign wars (the Irish Celts in particular). Another common path into slavery was debt enslavement or slavery as punishment. If a Scandinavian owed more money than they could pay, or if they were part of a murder or theft that could never be properly compensated for, they would be forced into slavery by the person to whom they were indebted. These individuals would remain slaves until their debt was fully repaid or their punishment time elapsed. Similarly, another way someone could become a slave is when they were sold into slavery by their family or by themselves for money or debt payment. If a family was extremely poor and there was no other way to gain funds, a member of the family could sell themselves or one of their children to get the money they needed.²⁵ Similar to the social strata, the different types of capture and enslavement remained largely the same throughout the Viking Age.

During the centuries of the Viking Expansion the terminology used for slaves and Scandinavian society's social strata changed considerably and became more complex. The word "thrall" comes to mean more than just "slave," and individuals began to be defined as more than

²⁴ Ibid., 37.

²⁵ Ibid.

just free and unfree but also foreign.²⁶ Prior to the Expansion, most slaves in Scandinavia were ethnically Scandinavian and there is also no evidence of travelling abroad to bring back foreign slaves. It appears that the foreign slaves Scandinavians owned were predominantly bought from the slave market. There were, however, slaves captured from surrounding areas in Scandinavia, and debt slaves. It does not seem as though the Scandinavians prior to the Viking Age valued or desired the capture of foreign slaves or slaves of any particular social or ethnic group more than any other. Although slaves had been a part of Scandinavian society for centuries, slavery was never a prominent part of society and most likely the slave population and economic power of slavery peaked during the Viking Age. During the Viking Age there was a switch from ethnically Scandinavian slaves to ethnically foreign slaves that were imported to Scandinavia, although not ever at a large scale.²⁷

Scandinavian Law:

The following section is an analysis of Scandinavian Law. Although there is limited source material and scholarship on Scandinavian law prior to the Viking Age, there are a few points to be emphasized. Many of the following laws are about the identity of enslaved persons, and the children of slaves. These laws are important to understanding the status of slaves and the identity of the children from master and slave unions. In chapter 4, changes in Scandinavian laws after the Viking Expansion and Christianization are presented. This section is important to

²⁶ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 40–50.

²⁷ Knut Helle, “The History of the Early Viking Age in Norway,” in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 252.

understand how law changes from Scandinavia to Iceland affected the social status of slaves and the identity of the children of Norse masters and Irish slaves in Iceland.

There are some historians who make the mistake of claiming that Scandinavian law is similar to medieval European law, assuming that it was created by the kingship or the clergy, which was often not the case.²⁸ In England, the law was inseparable from the Church and monarchy, while the majority of law-making in Scandinavia was done by the middle and upper strata who would convene at a meeting called a *Thing*. The Norse, particularly Iceland, were very passionate about laws and created extremely complex law codes. Originally, most laws created before and in the early part of the Viking Age were not written but memorized by the designated Lawspeaker. This means that many of the laws that were written during and after the Viking Age were from earlier oral traditions in Scandinavia. There is more information on enslavement in the West by the Norwegians and the Danes than there is about eastern Europe and Sweden.²⁹

One of the complex subjects in many of the law codes is legislation on slavery. There is great detail given that describes the status of a child of a slave in several different situations in a few of the codes, however these can vary greatly between regions. Swedish laws are the most specific on the ownership of slave children. This is probably the case because there was less access to foreign captives in Sweden and therefore they relied more on hereditary slavery, making the descendants of slaves' social status a more important issue. There were also more signs of indigenous slavery and lengthier law codes on debt slavery in Sweden than the other Scandinavian countries.³⁰ Danish laws, however, make no explicit statement about the freedom

²⁸ Brink, "Slavery in the Viking Age," 433.

²⁹ Stefan Brink, "The Creation of a Scandinavian Provincial Law: How Was It Done?: The Creation of a Scandinavian Provincial Law," *Historical Research* 86, no. 233 (August 2013): 434, doi:10.1111/1468-2281.12006.

³⁰ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 53–55.

of slaves' children or the children of mixed slaves or free unions. Denmark had better access to foreign captives and a slave market as well as higher rates of infant slave exposure. This implies that it was not as necessary to create distinct laws on the hereditary status of slaves in these countries. In Norway, the *Frostaping* laws state that the child of a slave father and free mother is born free, while the child of a free man and slave woman is born a slave.³¹ This implies that the Norwegian culture placed a greater emphasis on the status of an individual's mother rather than their father. Although there is no other evidence of this so it is not conclusive. Danish and Swedish laws do not make any distinctions between native and foreign-born slaves, while Norwegian law does, which implies that Norway had higher numbers of foreign slaves than Denmark or Sweden.³² Before Christianization, there was no way to buy back the freedom of a captured and enslaved relative unless ransom was offered for them and there were no laws that forbid the killing of slaves. Both changed after the adoption of Christianity. It also became illegal for a freeman to marry a slave.³³ While Christianization did not abolish slavery entirely, there were certain laws created that protected slaves from

Society and Enslavement in the Pre-Invasion Ireland and England:

This section provides a brief discussion of the history and political status of Ireland before the Viking Age. As in the section above, this section will discuss hundreds of years of history and end during the early part of the Viking Age. The political and social history of Ireland is described, including previous episodes of enslavement, as well as a brief look at

³¹ Ibid., 51.

³² Ibid., 53–55.

³³ Ibid.

slavery in England and at slaves held by the Catholic Church. This section offers a view of society and enslavement in the British Isles before the Vikings arrived even if it is not specific to Ireland.

There is little literary or historical information available for life in Ireland prior to the Viking Expansion. At the beginning of the Viking Age, Ireland was divided into many small kingdoms that were in near constant and intense strife. It was easy for the Vikings to take advantage of the situation and raid often without fear of a large organized retaliation.³⁴ Of course there is some evidence that the Irish had been enslaved before, several centuries before the Vikings arrived. There are 5TH century historical accounts of a Britanniian warrior named Coroticus who captured and sold into the British slave trade many newly converted Irish Christians. St. Patrick, the saint responsible for the Christianization of Ireland, was outraged by this and labeled Coroticus a kin-slayer because he was a Christian enslaving other Christians. In some surviving letters, St. Patrick discusses this: “it is scandalous to them that we are Irish,”³⁵ and “Coroticus’s violence has turned the Irish from being ‘the people of the Lord’ into *extranei* ‘strangers’ or even ‘foreigners.’”³⁶ Coroticus’ capture of the Irish people was an act of defiance because he believed they were lesser beings than himself and his society and, as to be expected, they were seen as such by others. This rejected the teachings of the Christian Church since the Church claims that Christians are supposed to welcome all people regardless of their origins and appearance. Other than this incident, there seems to be very little other information regarding the Irish and enslavement, society, or law.

³⁴ Katherine Holman, *The Northern Conquest: Vikings in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), 155.

³⁵ James Graham-Campbell and Michael Ryan, eds., *Anglo-Saxon-Irish Relations before the Vikings*, Proceedings of the British Academy 157 (Oxford: published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2009), 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Slavery in England existed prior to the Expansion and did not end completely until the Norman Conquest and the increasing power of the Church shortly after the Viking Age officially ended in the 11th century. Prior to this, the Catholic Church preached against the poor treatment of slaves and other humans, yet kept their own slaves and never bothered to try and abolish the institution.³⁷ At the time of the Viking Expansion, Vikings did not dominate trade or violence. In fact, there were actually fewer Viking attacks than by others, even during two of the peak periods for Viking raids from 840-920 and 960-1000.³⁸ Sometimes, Vikings themselves fell victim to raids and violence. There were some areas in Europe where their presence is scarcely found in the archaeology and in Britain there is much less evidence of Viking presence than the Romans. Still, the Scandinavian culture did make a large impact on the Irish Sea region where Viking iconography, art, language, and technology lasted through the 9th, 10th, and 11th centuries and some long after that.³⁹

Burials and Human Sacrifice:

The following section provides evidence of human sacrifice and Norse burial. A discussion of Norse mortuary practices provides important data supporting change in Norse traditions during and after the Viking Age. There are several primary sources that discuss Norse human sacrifice including Adam of Bremen, Ibn Rusta, Thietmar of Merseberg, and Ibn Fadlān. All of these sources have bias and certain elements may have been embellished. This section is introducing archaeological reports describing Viking burials instead of these primary sources.

³⁷ A. M. Wergeland, "Slavery in Germanic Society During the Middle Ages: II," *Journal of Political Economy* 9, no. 3 (June 1, 1901): 398–422.

³⁸ David Griffiths, "Irish Sea Identities and Interconnections during the Viking Age," in *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and after the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2015), 480–481.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 481.

All but one of the following sites are in Scandinavia. Another site, on the Isle of Man, is a unique site in the Viking world and has been included in the thesis for that reason. There are no Irish sites discussed here because there appears to have been very few. This indicates that, for whatever reason, the Norse in Ireland did often not sacrifice slaves as burial goods. The conversion to Christianity or interactions with the Irish are probable reasons for this anomaly. Some of these sites occurred during the Viking Age and this sets up next chapter.

For the Norse, slaves were great source of wealth and status. The sacrifice of slaves were another addition to elaborate grave goods. Throughout Scandinavia and the British Isles there were burials that contain evidence of human sacrifice, presumably of slaves. There are several such sites in Scandinavia, the majority of which are in Denmark. In Stengade, Denmark there was a man buried next to another man who is decapitated and bound. This is a somewhat common occurrence in Norse burials. Another such site is at the Hill Fort Wall in Birka, Sweden where a decapitated man had been laid on top of another man who had many rich grave goods surrounding him. In Lejre, Denmark, there is a decapitated man buried with another man. These cases are most likely evidence of human sacrifice. The violent decapitation of one of the individuals in the grave most likely is evidence of a sacrifice by beheading. However, it is the bound arms and legs of the individual that gives the strongest evidence of a sacrifice. The bindings may have been used to keep the individual from fleeing or fighting back, but they may also be symbols of bondage and status of this individual as a slave to their master in the afterlife. It seems unlikely that an individual who was bound and decapitated would be buried with another individual, sometimes with other elaborate grave goods, and not be a slave sacrificed for the good of the master's afterlife.

At Ballateare, Isle of Man there is a unique grave that suggest the sacrifice of a slave. There is a mound with an armed male youth buried inside with grave goods. On the next layer of the mound, there is a young woman killed from a sword blow to the back of the head apparently while kneeling on the mound after it had already been built. Yet another oddity of this site is the fact that there are fragments from her skull missing.⁴⁰ The woman's status as a slave is uncertain as she was killed some time after the completion of the original burial. However, she may have been sacrificed on as a death companion for the man inside the mound. The brutal head wound suggest that she was murdered and the fact that she was kneeling may indicate her inferiority to the man inside the mound. There are any number of reasons for why she was not inside the original mound with the man. She may not have been considered worthy enough to be buried next to the man, or there was a gap in time when she could not be buried with him so the community was forced to finish the mound until she was prepared to be sacrificed.

One important site on the island Flakstad, Norway contains many graves that spanned approximately 550 to 1030 C.E.. Some are single graves and others contain two or three bodies. The double and triple graves feature a full skeleton and partial skeleton(s) with the head gone and the hands and feet bound. The headless skeletons also had fewer grave goods. These graves have been interpreted as a master, with one or two slaves buried with them. Individuals in single graves are assumed to be commoners with no slaves because they are accompanied by fewer grave goods and no sacrificed individuals. DNA analysis shows that there was no maternal relationship between the individuals buried together. Isotope analyses show that the majority of the population had a diet that mainly consisted of marine animals and the commoners had similar diets to the slaves. The individuals presumed to have been part of an upper strata of the society,

⁴⁰ Neil Price, "Dying and the Dead: Viking Age Mortuary Behavior," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 266.

however, had a different, more nutritious diet with a larger variety of food.⁴¹ This site gives insight into not only the rich and enslaved of Norse society, but also the common class. Although, human sacrifice at Norse burials occurred sporadically, it never was very common. Slaves in Norse burials shows the complete dominance masters had over their slaves. The implication these graves give is that the Norse were not as benign of slave-owners as other sources suggest. While there may have been some strata flexibility, an enslaved individual was still completely controlled by their masters until their freedom was given to them.

Conclusions:

There were slaves in Scandinavia for centuries before the Viking Age. In the original Germanic culture of southern Scandinavia there were slaves who were able to own their own homes, land, and sell produce to earn money to buy their freedom. Several hundred years later that social mobility persisted although the status of slaves changed from hutted slaves to modern conception of slaves. In the British Isles, slavery existed for centuries even though the Catholic Church did not condone it and the Irish had a history of capture and enslavement before the Vikings ever arrived. At times the Norse would sacrifice slaves to bury with their masters for assistance in the afterlife or as symbol of social status, although it never occurred very often. The totally control and dominance of the masters over their slaves implies that Norse slavery may have been more violent than some primary sources would suggest.

⁴¹ Elise Naumann et al., “Slaves as Burial Gifts in Viking Age Norway? Evidence from Stable Isotope and Ancient DNA Analyses,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 41 (January 2014): 533–40, doi:10.1016/j.jas.2013.08.022.

Chapter III: The Viking Expansion in Ireland

This chapter focuses on the Viking Expansion in the British Isles, particularly Ireland. Norse and Irish interactions are emphasized, including discussions on raiding and settlement as well as captive-taking and enslavement. It is important to understand these practices because it was these interactions that influenced Norse culture. There is also an analysis of cultural change during this time period and how the Irish influenced the Norse. The chapter is separated into three sections: the Viking Expansion into the British Isles, Ireland during the Viking Age, and *Rígsþula*. The section on the Viking Expansion in the British Isles is a brief overview of the Viking Expansion into the British Isles discussing raids, captives, and settlements. This puts into perspective the rest of the chapter. The second section on Ireland during the Viking Age is divided into two topics: Irish Enslavement and Irish-Norse Interactions. There is also a discussion of cultural interaction and enslavement focusing on the effects this process had on both cultures. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the Eddic Poem *Rígsþula*, which is one of the most important primary sources available on Norse social strata.

Viking Expansion into the British Isles:

This section is an overview of the Expansion in the British Isles and is separated into two parts. The first discusses raiding and captive-taking by Vikings, and the second discusses the settlement of Vikings in the British Isles. While this section is a broad view of raiding and settlement in the British Isles, the rest of the chapter focuses specifically on Ireland. This section gives the context needed for the following topics.

Raids and Captives:

Evidence for Viking raids can be found in contemporary literature, such as the Icelandic Sagas, and historical documents and records, such as provincial laws and Annals. Contrary to popular belief, the Viking raids in the middle of the 8th century and beyond were not at all unusual for medieval Europe; most societies across the continent before and during the Viking Age were frequently raided by other groups. The only notable difference between the Vikings and other raiders was their use of ships and emphasis on strong tactical coordination, which made their raids more successful. The early Viking raids began because of a desire to gain more wealth than was available to them in Scandinavia alone.⁴² The most common target of these initial raids were Christian monasteries, particularly in the British Isles, because they held much more material wealth than other European settlements. The success of early voyages in locations such as the British Isles prompted the Vikings to expand their raids to many other areas across Europe.

For the Vikings, captives were a great source of wealth and one of the primary targets for raids. Many people were taken and sold into the slave trade or ransomed back to their families. This was true for all of the Viking Expansion across Europe and the Atlantic. Sometimes the Vikings brought slaves back to Scandinavia to keep as their own servants, often to highlight their wealth and status. However, the majority of captive-taking by the Vikings was to gain material wealth by selling them, not to enslave them. The rest of this chapter will focus entirely on captive-taking during Viking raids.

⁴² Gareth Williams, "Raiding and Warfare," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 193–203.

Settlement:

Shortly after Viking raids started, Scandinavians began to settle in various parts of Europe in order to gain permanent wealth. If the Vikings raided the same monasteries every year, fewer and fewer goods would remain. It is also possible that after a few years of raiding, the monasteries, including the ones that may not yet have been raided, stopped keeping valuable goods there for fear of them being taken. After raids became to be less profitable for the Vikings around the middle or late 9th century, they began to settle in the British Isles.⁴³

Viking Settlement in the British Isles was a slow process that happened gradually over several centuries. There is some archaeological evidence that suggests Norwegian settlement in the Scottish Northern Isles may have begun as early as the beginning of the 9th century.⁴⁴ It is often hard to identify particular Viking settlements, however, there were a few large Viking towns that are still occupied to this day, such as York, England and Dublin, Ireland.⁴⁵ Sometimes members of the Viking upper class would marry into British or Irish royalty, allowing for peaceful transition to Viking control or political unification between the Irish and the Vikings. In other cases, there were battles for kingdoms. Such battles were fought often by Norse Christian, although they were not very common. However, there are a few instances of the reverse happening. Sometimes the Irish or British attacked and raided Viking settlements. The Irish were involved in internecine warfare well before the Vikings came and, similar to the Norse, believed that fighting raised an individual's status or was an 'obligation of status,' for a particular

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁵ Julian D. Richards, "Viking Settlement in England," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 371.

individual's social strata.⁴⁶ This attitude, as well as self-preservation, resulted in the Irish fighting the Viking invaders and defending themselves. In the middle of the 10th century Dublin was sacked and burned with many Norse people taken as slaves by the Irish King Conghalach.⁴⁷

It was primarily the Norwegians who immigrated to the British Isles, although there were some Danes as well. The impact that the Vikings made on the British Isles was so powerful that it can still be seen to this day, particularly in place names and last names. Sometimes modern names reveal ancestral social strata, such as those of the unfree and lower class who all had names that contained the origin for the Norse word “thrall.”⁴⁸

Ireland during the Viking Age:

This section discusses the Viking Expansion in Ireland including Viking settlements, Irish enslavement and Irish-Norse interactions. It is important to understand slavery during the Viking Age because it was these cultural interactions and clashes that altered Norse culture and identity. There are two topics in the following section: the Enslavement of the Irish and Norse and Irish Interactions. The topic on enslavement is an analysis of captive-taking and Irish slaves, while the second topic focuses on cultural interactions and hybrid communities.

⁴⁶ Howard B. Clarke, “Unsung Heroes: The Irish and the Viking Wars,” in *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West: Papers from the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 18-27 August 2005* (Dublin ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2010), 64.

⁴⁷ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, “The Vikings and Ireland,” in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 432.

⁴⁸ Alexander Bugge, “The Norse Settlements in the British Islands,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fourth Series, 4 (January 1, 1921): 173–210, doi:10.2307/3678332.

The Enslavement of the Irish:

At the very beginning of the Viking Expansion, raids and interactions between the Vikings and the Irish were sporadic. The first raid in Ireland took place on Lambay Island in 795, two years after the first Viking raid of the Viking Age on the island of Lindisfarne.⁴⁹ One of the first Viking settlements, Dublin, was established almost half a century later in 841 on the east coast of Ireland.⁵⁰ Dublin was an excellent location for Viking settlement due to its central position in the British Isles and ideal geography for trade and agriculture.⁵¹ Around the middle of the 9th century Vikings began making alliances with certain Irish royals, predominantly in eastern Ireland.⁵² During the years of 823 and 831 there was an eight year break in Viking raids and attacks. In the *Annals of Ulster* it is recorded that after this break in the year 831: “[Vikings] raided Howth and ‘took a great prey of women.’” Many were likely taken as slaves or captives for ransom.⁵³ Beginning in 836, there was an increasing number of large-scale attacks of which there are many records describing murder, pillage, and captive-taking.⁵⁴

Evidence from historical sources available propose that capture and slave trade was the main objective of Viking raids in 9th century Ireland, making slaves Ireland’s largest export during the Viking Age.⁵⁵ Sometimes there were hundreds of captives taken during a single raid. An Irish Annal describes one incident where over 700 captives were taken from Armagh, Ireland by raiders from Dublin.⁵⁶ Crimes committed during Viking raids were detailed in many

⁴⁹ David M. Wilson, “Scandinavian Settlement in the North and West of the British Isles: An Archaeological Point-of-View,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (1976): 105, doi:10.2307/3679074.

⁵⁰ Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, 82.

⁵¹ Wilson, “Scandinavian Settlement in the North and West of the British Isles,” 110.

⁵² Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, 86.

⁵³ Corráin, “The Vikings and Ireland,” 429.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, 13.

⁵⁶ Valante, *The Vikings in Ireland*, 87.

historical sources. During a period in the 830s and 840s there were 14 incidents of captive taking recorded, but only two attacks on oratories, the destruction of a single shrine and one raid of a flock of sheep.⁵⁷

It seems as though women were captured more frequently than men and that female captives were much more desirable than male captives both in the European slave market and as personal slaves for the Scandinavians. Although many slaves were sold into the slave trade, some taken back to Scandinavia for enslavement, and some kept by the Norse in the Ireland as their own personal slaves, often the Norse would capture people only to ransom back to their families them for wealth. The capture of St. Fintan is one of the most well-known examples of Viking ransom. St. Fintan was captured after trying to ransom his sister but later freed after another family member paid both his and his sister's ransom.⁵⁸ Captive-taking slowed down quite a bit in a twenty year period between 853 and 873 when there were only six documents in the Irish Annals of captives taken in Ireland. During this time the Norwegian settlers were attempting to build stronger social and economic bonds with the Irish kingdoms so it is possible that they halted the raids to allow peaceful relationships develop.

Norse and Irish Interactions:

Once the Viking Expansion was underway in Ireland, the Irish began to differentiate the Norwegians and Danes. The Norwegians were known as "light/fair foreigners," while the Danes were known as "dark foreigners." There are several theories on the origins of these terms. The most well-known theory, proposed by Nordic historian Alexander Bugge, is that the names come

⁵⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 86–87.

from differences in complexion and coloration between the two Scandinavian regions, in other words, the Norwegians had lighter colored hair and a fairer complexion than the Danes.

However, there is another theory by W.J. Goedheer that it was the color of the sails on the ships of the two Viking groups that created the terms. He claims that the Norwegians often had white sails and shields while the Danes usually had darker sails and shields.⁵⁹ There has also been a new theory proposed by David N. Dumville that utilizes the Irish Gaelic words “light” and “dark.” These two words have secondary translations meaning “new” and “old.” The Irish may have been differentiating them by their timing of arrival rather than physical characteristics. The first waves of Scandinavians to enter Ireland were from Norway, while the later waves were primarily from Denmark, making the Norwegians the “old foreigners” and the Danes the “new foreigners.”⁶⁰

One of the most important aspects about culture is language. Changes in language during the Viking Age occurred due to Norse-Irish interactions. Hybrid communities were created in Ireland after the Norse settlement. Some of these communities were created through marriage or proximity,⁶¹ while others were created after the enslavement of the Irish. There is some linguistic evidence of a distinction in dialects between groups in Ireland. It appears that some communities used a language with both Irish Gaelic and Old Norse elements.⁶²

There is a great deal of complexity in Norse culture and identity during the Viking Age. Even after settlement, Christianization, and inter-marriage with the Irish, Scandinavians

⁵⁹ Howard B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson, “Ireland and the Viking Age,” in *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond: Before and after the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2015), 15–16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶¹ Christina Lee, “Costumes and Contact: Evidence for Scandinavian Women in the Irish Sea Region,” in *The Vikings in Ireland and beyond: Before and after the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2015), 284.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 285.

maintained certain aspects about their social identity and culture. Archaeologists use clothing and burial practices to distinguish whether a grave is of a person who was Norse, Irish or both. It appears that in some of the hybrid communities Norse dress and burial practice continued.⁶³ However, it also appears that the Vikings eventually began to call themselves “easterners” rather than Norwegians. This is the name that the Irish gave them since Scandinavia was to the east and most Viking settlements, such as Dublin, were in eastern Ireland. This practice continues even into Iceland and it is the way that Norwegians are spoken of in the Icelandic Sagas.⁶⁴

Rígspula:



Figure 3: Depiction of the god Ríg with Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother

Rígspula is one of the most important sources in this thesis and is key evidence for Norse cultural change after interaction with the Irish. This primary source directly describes the origins of Scandinavian slaves and is referenced by many secondary sources that analyze slavery during

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Clarke and Johnson, “The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond,” 16–17.

the Viking Age. While some scholars claim that the poem's origins are ancient and even precede the Viking Expansion, others claim that it is one of the younger poems in the Poetic Edda and actually has its origins in Ireland. *Rígsþula* was first written down in Iceland sometime before the 12th century,⁶⁵ and some claim that it originated in Iceland as well, although there are other theories that it originated in Northumbria, Ireland or Norway.⁶⁶ The following analyses are from Thomas D. Hill's journal article *Rígsþula: Some Medieval Christian Analogues* and Stefan Brink's essay *Slavery in the Viking Age*.

Rígsþula is one of the most thoroughly studied pieces of Old Norse literature and is especially important for understanding Nordic enslavement and social strata during the Viking Age. It is a poem in the *Poetic Edda*, a volume of poems from Old Norse Mythology, that describes the Norse god Ríg creating the three different classes of medieval Norse society. Ríg is a god that is otherwise unmentioned in the rest of Old Norse literature, however, it is stated in the introduction that Ríg was the Norse god Heimdallr, the god of boundaries. Ríg travels to three homes and spends a night sleeping in-between each of the couples living there. The first couple's names were "father" and "mother" and their child with Ríg was named "thrael" which roughly translate into "slave." Thrael married a woman named "Thír" which roughly means "slave girl." All of their descendants were ugly, dark, small, stupid, and had ugly names, and they were all slaves thereafter. The second couple was named "grandfather" and "grandmother" and their child was named Karl which means "freeman." Karl had red hair, a rough complexion and married a woman named "Snör" meaning "daughter-in-law." All of their descendants were average looking, had average intelligence, average names, and they all became farmers and merchants in

⁶⁵ Frederic Amory, "The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*," *Alvíssmál: Forschungen Zur Mittelalterlichen Kultur Skandinaviens* 10 (2001): 4–5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

the middle or common strata. The third and final couple was named “Great-grandfather” and “Great-grandmother,” and their child was named “Jarl” or “noble.” Jarl was blonde, very white and extremely skilled. All of his descendants were kings, warriors and noble men and all were white, blonde, attractive, clever and brave with beautiful names.⁶⁷

One of the theories of *Rígsþula*'s origin is that it originated in Northumbria, England. The social strata described in the poem had existed in the British Isles for centuries. In the Bible, the story of Ham describes a man who is cursed after seeing his father, Noah, naked. Ham and all of his descendants are described as dark and ugly and destined be the servants to those who honor god. It fits with the mythology of the *Rígsþula* because God makes Ham and his descendants dark and ugly slaves just as Ríg makes “Thrael” and his descendants dark and ugly slaves. Since this social structure existed in Britain for so long, people there began to assume it was just how God made the world even though the Bible has many other passages that claim that all people under God are equal.⁶⁸ There are scholars who claim that this Biblical story influenced *Rígsþula*.

While some historians believe the *Rígsþula* originated in England or Ireland, others believe it originated in Iceland. The primary evidence behind this theory is that Iceland is where the original poem was written, although there is much evidence to the contrary. There is absolutely no version of this story in any Old Icelandic or any other early Germanic literatures, and there is not even one that is similar to it. The social structure of Iceland also never resembled the structure described in the poem so it does not make sense for a creation poem concerning social structure to have originated there. Slavery was outlawed in Iceland in the 12th or 13th century and even then, early Icelandic Law rarely distinguished between noble, commoner and

⁶⁷ *The Poetic Edda*, Second Edition edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 246–252.

⁶⁸ Thomas D. Hill, “Rígsþula: Some Medieval Christian Analogues,” *Speculum* 61, no. 1 (1986): 79–89, doi:10.2307/2854537.

slave. There was not even a king in Iceland until they fell under Norwegian rule in 1262. The *Rígsþula* may have been written in Iceland but most likely it was not originally created there.⁶⁹

The most well-accepted theory for the origin of *Rígsþula* is that it is a Nordic adaption of Irish folktales. One of the most important examples is a story written by Solinus that describes a nameless Hebrides king whom creates the social strata, which is very similar to *Rígsþula* because of a single being creating each social class. Separation between strata, like in *Rígsþula*, often occurs in Irish texts but does not appear very frequently in Norse texts. In the Irish Law of Status, the *Críth Gablach*, there is a description of the class system that is much more decisive and concrete than anything in the Norse laws. The Norse standards for heroism and honor are very similar to that of Ireland so it is not always easy to distinguish how the two cultures influenced each other with these kinds of narratives. According to Stefan Brink Ríg might also be an Irish name, which may imply *Rígsþula* was written in Ireland during or after the Viking Expansion.⁷⁰ Norse interactions with Irish culture and folklore very likely influenced this poem. Like the Norse-Irish communities, *Rígsþula* is a hybrid work that incorporates aspects of both cultures.

Conclusions:

Slaves were the primary source of wealth for the Norse during the Viking Age. When the Vikings took captives during raids, they sold them on the European slave market, ransomed them to their families, took them back to Scandinavia as their own personal slaves, or kept them as their slaves in new Viking settlements in Ireland. Irish-Norse relations were often hostile,

⁶⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁷⁰ Brink, "Slavery in the Viking Age," 53–55.

although there were times of peaceful diplomacy and marriage between elites. The enslavement of the Irish, as well as other types of Irish-Norse interactions, created hybrid communities that incorporated aspects from both cultures. Language, as well as literature, are other examples of this hybridization. *Rígsþula* is an Eddic Poem that most likely was influenced by Irish folklore and is a key example of the Norse cultural change that occurred during the Viking Age.

Chapter IV: The Settlement of Iceland and Norse-Irish Identity

This chapter is an analysis of enslavement and social identity in Iceland. Iceland is vital to understanding the Norse-Irish identity that resulted from Irish enslavement during the Viking Age. The chapter is separated into four sections. The first, the Irish in Iceland, analyzes the ethnic distribution of Icelanders during and shortly after the Viking Age. This shows how ethnic distributions, both free citizens and slaves, affected the Icelandic culture, language and poetry. The second section discusses Irish enslavement in Iceland. Differences between Irish enslavement in Ireland and Iceland is emphasized. The third section is on Icelandic Law and Christianization. It analyzes Icelandic Laws, how they differ from original Scandinavian Laws and how Christianity influenced law and enslavement in Iceland. This section is important for understanding how Norse-Irish interactions and Irish enslavement influenced Norse law and culture. The section also discusses how changes in Norse law altered enslavement practices in Iceland. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the Icelandic Sagas, their historicity and portrayal of Norse culture, identity, and Irish enslavement. Only one Saga, *Laxdæla Saga*, is discussed in detail. This analysis does not necessarily include additional evidence for the argument, but rather synthesizes points previously made through the examination of important Icelandic primary sources.

Icelandic history is divided into four ages. The Age of Settlement which occurred from 874-930, the Commonwealth Era from 930-1264, the Saga Age (the period of time in which most of the events described in the Icelandic Sagas occurred) from 874-1050, and the Age of Writing (the period of time in which the Sagas were written) from 1100 and 1340. It is important

to know these ages because persons and events from all four of these Ages are discussed in the chapter.

The Irish in Iceland:

This section discusses the first settlements of Iceland and the ethnic groups that inhabited them. DNA evidence and historical records provided in secondary sources are analyzed. Examining ethnic distribution is valuable for understanding the creation of Iceland's hybrid culture, language and poetry.

Iceland was settled in the year 874 with the establishment of what is now Reykjavík. This began the Age of Settlement, which lasted almost 60 years until 930.⁷¹ The majority of Icelandic settlers arrived from the British Isles (of Norse ancestry, Irish ancestry or both) and a few from Scandinavia, most of whom, were from Norway.⁷² Settlements often consisted of families comprised of Norse men and their Irish wives, as well as some slaves, many of whom came from Ireland. However, this does not mean that all Irish settlers were wives of Norse men or slaves. There were also free Irish Celts that settled among the Nordic population, although there were few comparatively. DNA evidence suggests that about 60% of the original female settlers were Irish, while only 20% of the original male settlers were.⁷³ Although it is now known that the majority of the Irish population during the settlement of Iceland were women, there is no way of

⁷¹ Kellogg, Various, and Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, xix.

⁷² Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Iceland," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 571.

⁷³ Gísli Sigurðsson, "The North Atlantic Expansion," in *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 563–564.

understanding exactly how many individuals in the Irish population were slaves, wives, or free settlers.⁷⁴

The entire Icelandic genome has been mapped out by geneticists, allowing for the determination of the earliest Icelandic settlers' origin.⁷⁵ This project has given significant insight into the genealogy and ethnic background of the current Icelandic population and their ancestors. Research using mitochondrial DNA shows that 58% of modern Icelandic women have Irish female ancestors.⁷⁶ Given the high percentage of Irish females, it seems unlikely that all Irish women were slaves and it is possible that many of these Irish women were married to male Norse settlers. Inter-marriage between the Norse and the Irish was somewhat common during the Viking Age. Sometimes Norse men married their Irish slaves because they needed wives for their new settlement. There were few Norse women in the British Isles and even less that agreed to come with them.⁷⁷ The status of the newlywed Irish women is unknown. Other Norse and Irish unions were from marriage alliances in Ireland as discussed in the previous chapter. Although primary sources available only document the two previous situations, there were likely other marriages that were not part of either category. These particular unions may not have been documented or the documents were lost.⁷⁸ There are comparatively few primary sources that discuss female Norse settlers than Irish wives.⁷⁹ With this knowledge, Icelandic settlement

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Daniel F. Gudbjartsson et al., "Large-Scale Whole-Genome Sequencing of the Icelandic Population," *Nature Genetics* 47, no. 5 (May 2015): 435–44, doi:10.1038/ng.3247.

⁷⁶ Lee, "The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond," 287.

⁷⁷ Kirsten A. Seaver, "Slaves and Queens: Female Slavery in the Medieval Norse Atlantic," in *Women and Slavery* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 153.

⁷⁸ Lee, "The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond," 287.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

consisted primarily of male Norse settlers, Irish wives, Irish slaves, free Irish settlers and a few Nordic wives.⁸⁰

While genetic data suggest that the majority of early Icelandic women were Irish, archaeological excavations have found predominantly Norse fashioned graves for women, not Irish. Many of the graves also contained Norse brooches which was a very common item of dress for Norse women. This shows that most Settlement Age Icelandic women wore Norse clothing. Since there does not seem to be enough female Norse settlers in Iceland in order for these findings to all be of women with strictly Norse ancestry, it is likely that Irish women adopted Norse styles of dress and burial after settling in Iceland.⁸¹

Icelandic naming conventions also have Irish influences. There are many examples of people and place names that are from the Irish Gaelic language or have Irish Gaelic roots. There are also some historical records of distinct linguistic groups across Iceland. These languages are often a combination of Old Norse and Irish Gaelic.⁸² While the official Icelandic language was primarily Old Norse, there were some regions where the people spoke a dialect that was a hybrid of Old Norse and Irish Gaelic. The high number of Norse from Ireland and the large proportion of female Irish settlers may be why this combination occurred in Iceland.

After the settlement of Iceland, a unique and distinctly Icelandic poetry emerged. The origin and style of the poetry is predominantly Germanic, but contains some distinct qualities that occur often in Irish poetry.⁸³ There are two reasons for this distinction. The first is that the

⁸⁰ Orri Vésteinsson, "Ethnicity and Class in Settlement-Period Iceland," in *The Viking Age: Ireland and the West: Papers from the Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 18-27 August 2005* (Dublin ; Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2010), 506.

⁸¹ Lee, "The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond," 288.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 285–286.

⁸³ Stefan Brink and Neil Price, eds., *The Viking World* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2008), 565. Sigurðsson, "The North Atlantic Expansion," 565.

Norse settlers who had arrived in Iceland from the British Isles had already been influenced by the Irish Gaelic culture. To add to this, there were enough Irish individuals who migrated to Iceland to influence the predominantly Nordic culture. Icelandic poetry another example of how the Irish influenced Norse culture.

Enslavement in Iceland:

This section is an analysis of Irish enslavement in Settlement Age Iceland. It is important to understand the role of slaves in medieval Iceland in order to study the effect Irish slaves had on Icelandic culture and social identity. The section includes a discussion of slavery in Icelandic historical records, an overview of the different forms of enslavement, and how slaves were perceived by the Icelanders.

There is evidence in many historical records and literary works that slavery existed in medieval Iceland. There are segments of several complex Icelandic law codes, such as the *Gragas*, that contain legislation on slavery. There are also descriptions of slaves in the *Landnámabók*, or the *Book of Settlements*, as well as many of the Icelandic Sagas.⁸⁴ In the *Landnámabók* there are at least 17 instances to slaves becoming free and building their own homesteads. The Sagas of the Icelanders have some of the richest depictions of slavery in medieval Iceland. The Sagas present an “image of slavery [that] is of household slaves. They are described as menial workers, sometimes valued and loyal, sometimes objects of ridicule, often foreign and always single, without family or blood-relations.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid., 503.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

According to Icelandic historian, Jónas Kristjánsson, the *Landnámabók* and the Icelandic Sagas describe two roles for the Irish: the Irish freemen, not including Irish wives, and the Irish slaves. The Irish freemen came to Iceland to claim and farm land, just like the Norse settlers. The original Irish settlers were Christians and who initially were forced to practice their religion as best they could in the pagan Norse society.⁸⁶ After a generation or two, the free Irish settlers merged their culture and lifestyle into the existing Norse society. This occurred even more quickly after the Christianization of Iceland. They do not appear frequently in the literature so very little is known about them. The Irish slave category, as depicted in literature, can be divided into three subgroups: “the good and faithful slaves, getting freedom and land as a reward from their owners. The Bad slaves rising against their masters, usually committing murder and finally being killed themselves. And the Noble slave-girls bought by Icelandic chieftains abroad, later becoming their concubines or even wives at home in Iceland.”⁸⁷ Since many of the slaves in the Icelandic Sagas fall into one of the three categories, most examples cannot be taken literally. However, the stereotypes given to Irish slaves in the Icelandic Sagas give valuable insight into the way the Norse perceived their Irish slaves.

Not all slaves in Iceland, nor all that appear in the Icelandic Sagas, are Irish. There were other slaves taken from many other countries, such as Scotland, England, or the Hebrides as well as some Norse that were either forced into debt slavery or captured. In the Icelandic Sagas most slaves are never given a nationality, however, when a nationality is given, the majority of them are identified as Irish.⁸⁸ Many of the Irish slaves and Irish settlers in Icelandic historical records and the Icelandic Sagas are described as having royal or prestigious pedigrees. However,

⁸⁶ Jónas Kristjánsson, “Ireland and the Irish in Icelandic Tradition,” in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), 262.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

historians still do not know how accurate these records are. Most likely there were some slaves of royal ancestry, but not so many as the Icelandic Sagas might suggest.

There appears to have been some social mobility in medieval Icelandic society. In Norse culture, a person's actions and accomplishments were extremely important and were even able to sometimes someone's status up or down the social strata. It was through their actions that Icelanders were able to become chieftains, slaves, or outlaws. Not only was the social structure fluid, but movement up in class was often seen as a great accomplishment and was praised. In fact, in Norse society an individual's achievements were seen as even greater if they rose up from slavery instead of a lower or middle class. Slaves, or freed slaves, were often given last names that contained words such as "thrall" to identify them as unfree. It would seem that while many slaves gained their freedom in Iceland, the stigma of slavery was mostly likely maintained for several more generations.⁸⁹

In medieval Iceland, slaves were seen as genealogically different from the rest of society, which means that they had no genealogy or family lineage. While the Norse valued action, they also valued heritage. Genealogy was extremely important to the Icelanders. There was more respect for individuals who had impressive genealogies and remarkable legendary ancestors. The Icelandic Sagas were written to preserve familial and local Icelandic history. This shows how low on the strata slaves were in medieval Norse society. It is peculiar that slaves were often seen as outside members of society, yet were able to gain freedom and be praised for their accomplishments. To the Norse, the greatest punishment was to be exiled or ex-communicated from society. By having no family lineage, slaves had no social or family connections within the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

homestead or settlement. This was considered to be a fate worse than death and is the primary reason behind enslavement as a form of punishment.⁹⁰

Icelandic Law and Christianization:

This section discusses Christianization and the effect this process had on Icelandic law and enslavement. Since lawmaking was so important in Norse society, analyzing these changes is important to examine how Norse culture was effected by interactions with the Irish Christians.

The Icelandic law codes contain considerably less legislation on slavery than the Scandinavian law codes do. Since many of the existing legal codes from medieval Iceland were created after Christianization, Christianity's effect on them is easily identified. Unlike most Scandinavian laws, the Icelandic law codes make no overt statement about the status of the children of slaves, or even the status of master and slave unions, whether or free or forced. Since there were no laws on hereditary slavery, the status of such individuals may have been determined by the master of that particular homestead. The lack of legislation on the status of slaves is most likely why there was so much fluidity between social strata in medieval Icelandic society.⁹¹

Christianization did not immediately end or abolish of slavery. There were, however, some variations of law codes regarding slave treatment. For instance, there was one law created that prohibited the killing of slaves during Lent or any other Christian holiday. At this time there was still no law that forbid the killing of slaves outright, or even laws on the capture and

⁹⁰ Karras, *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*, 98–100.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 98–110.

enslavement of peoples.⁹² One change that may have been influenced by Christianity is the absence of human sacrifice in the archaeological record of Iceland. There has been no evidence found of any human sacrifice in Iceland.⁹³ Burial practices in Iceland were similar to those in Scandinavia and Norse graves in the British Isles so it is odd that this one change occurred.⁹⁴

Slavery ended by 1271.⁹⁵ Although it was likely obsolete sometime before 1200. These dates may not be accurate due to lack of evidence in historical records. However, scholars have focused on these dates because of the decreasing number of references to slaves in Icelandic literature in the 11th and 12th centuries. There is only one reference to a debt-slave in one contemporary Icelandic Saga, *the Sturlunga Saga*, written in 1271, which describes events that occurred around 1170.⁹⁶ After that there are no more references to slaves or slavery, debt or otherwise, and it can be assumed that sometime between 1150 and 1271 there were no more slaves in Iceland.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 100–106.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Vésteinsson, “The Viking Age,” 503.

The Sagas of the Icelanders:



Figure 4: Egil's Saga, one of the most famous Icelandic Sagas

Some of the most important sources for Icelandic culture are literary works. Iceland contains one of the largest collections of preserved medieval manuscripts in the world. This collection includes: law codes, historical records, the Sagas of the Icelanders, as well as a variety of medieval stories and poems. Not only does this collection give scholars insight into medieval Iceland, but also contains information concerning the histories of other cultures, particularly pre and post-Expansion Scandinavia.

This section analyzes the Icelandic Sagas and how they support evidence of slavery in historical records and the archaeological record. The Icelandic Sagas are some of the most important sources among Norse literature and give valuable insight into Icelandic culture and

identity. There are two parts to this section. The first, Historicity of the Sagas, discusses the historical accuracy of the Icelandic Sagas and their value to Norse studies. The second part focuses on the most important Icelandic Saga for Irish enslavement: *the Saga of the People of Laxardal*. This section has a brief synopsis followed by an analysis of the major points in the Saga. This Icelandic Saga contains some of the only evidence available of hybrid Norse-Irish identities.

Historicity of the Sagas:

As discussed above, genealogy and local history was extremely important to the medieval Icelanders. It was common for individuals to document their own and their family members' accomplishments, as well as keep elaborate family trees that spanned centuries. The Icelandic Sagas were written as family and local histories of some of the most famous Icelandic families and homesteads. Sometimes they were written by descendants and other times by historians. Most were written centuries after the events described take place. The majority of the Sagas were written in the late 13th and 14th century, while the events took place between the 10th century and the 12th century.⁹⁷ Although the Icelandic Sagas were all written about real historical peoples and events, there are also many accounts within them that are embellished or supernatural. Some of these events include ghosts, rune spells, and stories that describe eight year old boys lifting with unimaginable strength. While there are many parts of the Sagas that cannot be corroborated historically, most of them can with historical records and archaeological sites. The main

⁹⁷ Kellogg, Various, and Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*.

characters and major plot lines are often historical, while the details and subplots may sometimes contain fiction.

Many of the slaves in the Sagas are most likely not based on actual historical figures. Scholars believe this because most of the “saga-slaves” cannot be corroborated in any historical or archaeological record. Oftentimes the actions of unfree individuals depicted in the Sagas are not substantial enough to have been remembered for several centuries and included in the story. In these cases, the “saga-slaves” may not have been based on historical figures, but rather were representations of the way the 13th and 14th century Icelanders envisioned 10th-12th century slaves. This means that, as primary sources, the Icelandic Sagas can give an insightful look at slavery in medieval Iceland or, at the very least, how slavery during this time period was interpreted in later centuries. The fact that slaves were depicted at all in these stories implies that slaves were somewhat common in medieval Icelandic society.⁹⁸ While slaves occur in many of the Icelandic Sagas, this chapter only discusses one. *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* gives the most significant portrayal of Irish slaves in the Icelandic Sagas. This story synthesizes main points argued earlier in this chapter and analyzes Norse-Irish and free-unfree identity.

The Saga of the People of Laxardal:

The most important Icelandic Saga for Irish enslavement in medieval Iceland is *the Saga of the People of Laxardal*. It is the only Saga that directly discusses Irish slaves, their social identity, and status in society. It supports the theme of this chapter and thesis. Irish slaves were a key element in producing the hybrid culture and identity of Iceland. It was written during the 13th

⁹⁸ Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 143–145.

century, and unlike the majority of Icelandic Sagas, this is not a history of a single individual or family, but rather a community in northwestern Iceland from the late 9th to early 11th centuries. The story begins with a man named Ketill Flatnose who flees Norway with his family in order to escape the tyranny of King Harald Fairhair and settles in Iceland. This is the case with many of the Norwegian settlers in Iceland at this time. The story then skips ahead many decades to the story of his great-grandson, Höskuldr, and his Irish slave-woman, and concubine Melkorka, whom he bought while traveling abroad, presumably in the British Isles. Höskuldr and Melkorka never marry but have one son together, Olaf Peacock. Melkorka does not speak for years until she finally informs her son about her ancestry. Melkorka is actually an Irish Princess, daughter of King Mýrkjartan, who was captured at the age of fifteen. After Olaf Peacock begins a journey to discover his own identity in Ireland, the story shifts to that of a love triangle between a woman, Guðrún, and two close friends and foster brothers, Kjartan, and Bolli. Kjartan, of which, is the son of Olaf Peacock.⁹⁹

Although Melkorka and Olaf are the most important slave and mixed-heritage persons in the Saga, there are several other slaves that are worth discussing briefly. There are several sections on giving slaves their freedom. One slave, Hrolf, was freed by his owner for his good work. Hrolf is important because, not only was he specifically named and freed, but his owner gave him land to farm after freeing him which shows that not only did slaves in Iceland have the ability to move up in social strata, but that their masters would help them begin their new free lives.¹⁰⁰ There is also a reference to Unn the Deep-minded freeing several of her slaves and giving them some land as well.¹⁰¹ There is another a part of the Saga when one slave was thought

⁹⁹ Kellogg, Various, and Smiley, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 270–421.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

very highly of: “. . . though he was called a slave, yet few could be found his equal amongst those called freemen.”¹⁰² This is an example of slaves holding actual value to their masters.

While this may not have occurred often, and may never have actually changed a slave’s status in society, slaves may not have been seen as inferior in all circumstances. There is a chance that slaves, just as commoners, were able to improve their situation and move up in class through their actions. The stigma of slavery may have followed them and their families for years after they were given their freedom, however, there were still times when a slave, or ex-slave, were looked upon with admiration.

The most prominent slave in all of the Icelandic Sagas is Melkorka. Although there are other examples of slaves with important roles, she is the only one with a backstory and real influence over the plot. Although her family and heritage is given, there is no specified information on the details surrounding her capture or why she was taken. Part of the Saga follows Olaf Peacock and his search for his own identity in Ireland. Upon arriving in Ireland, his ship partially wrecks and he and his crew fight off the Irish as they try to take the ship for themselves. Eventually Olaf meets his grandfather King Mýrkjartan who offers him the kingdom as his heir. After Olaf declined, he returned to Iceland and became the heir of his father Höskuldr’s estate, being put ahead of his own half-brother who was the legitimate son of his father.¹⁰³ This story line significant for several reasons. The first is that it is the only Saga, or historical record for that matter, that describes a specific slave with a name and history. The second is the implication left by the Irish King’s proposition to Olaf Peacock. This event implies that the medieval Irish had no laws or negative cultural perceptions concerning people of mixed heritage or social strata. The King accepted that Olaf was his grandson and Olaf’s identity as an

¹⁰² Ibid., 286.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 313–316.

illegitimate child of an Irish slave and Icelandic freemen was not important enough to keep the King from giving Olaf his inheritance. The last, but perhaps most important, part of this plot line is Olaf's inheritance from his father, Höskuldr. What made Olaf Peacock stand out more than his legitimate, fully Norse half-brother was Olaf's excursions abroad and battle endeavors, which supports the notion that the medieval Norse valued actions above social strata. In this scenario, legitimacy was not as powerful as action. Olaf's journey to Ireland to discover his own identity is an example of an Icelander accepting their Irish ancestry and decent. Interactions with the Irish and the capture of Irish slaves did not only influence Norse culture and language, but also their social identity. Olaf Peacock did not identify as only Norse, he embraced his Irish heritage and hybrid identity.

Conclusions:

Iceland was a hybrid culture of the Norse and the Irish. While many traditions remained Norse, there were influences in poetry, language, and literature from Ireland. The settlement population in Iceland comprised largely of the Norse and Irish. Most of the Norse came from colonies in Ireland and had already been influenced by the Irish. The Norse that had travelled from Norway were often fleeing King Harald Fairhair's wrathful tyranny. The majority of the Norse were men, while the majority of the Irish were women. The original settlement contained Norse men, Irish wives, free Irish settlers and Irish slaves. The majority of slaves in Iceland appear to be Irish, although there were slaves of other ethnicities and many free Irish settlers. The conversion to Christianity did not end enslavement in Iceland but prevented the murder of slaves on Christian holidays. The Sagas of the Icelanders are a valuable primary source for social life in medieval Iceland. The *Laxdæla Saga* is the most important Icelandic Saga for Irish

identity and enslavement. It gives an important example of an individual embracing their Irish heritage. In Iceland, the Irish not only influenced the language and culture, but also social identity.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Norse-Irish interactions and the enslavement of the Irish had an impact on Norse culture and social identity. Neither the Norse nor the Irish blended completely into the other culture, however, hybrid cultures formed that preserved Scandinavian roots while also embracing new Irish society.

Prior to the Expansion, the people of Scandinavia owned slaves in small numbers. Slavery was not rare, but it was not especially common either. The Scandinavians would sometimes bury their slaves with their masters as both a status symbol and death companion. This did not change during the Expansion in the British Isles, however, it does not seem to have occurred in Iceland. Scandinavians spoke Old Norse and believed in the Norse gods. Law-making and public assembly was especially important in their culture.

During the 8th century, Vikings began raiding Christian monasteries and other wealthy sites for treasure. Eventually they began to settle in colonies across Europe in order to permanently gain land and wealth. Relations between the Vikings and the Irish were at times aggressive and other times diplomatic. While some Irish kingdoms battled the Vikings, others arranged marriages and made treaties. Captives were the main objective of most Viking raids and one of the greatest sources of wealth. Captives would sometimes be kept as slaves by the Norse in the British Isles or Scandinavia, and sometimes they would be ransomed back to their families. The majority of the time, however, captives were sold on the slave trade. Norse slavery peaked during the Viking Age. Interactions and the enslavement of the Irish influenced Norse language and poetry. Communities were settled in Ireland that contained peoples from both cultures and the primary language spoken by these individuals was a hybrid dialect between Old

Norse and Irish Gaelic. The Eddic Poem *Rígsþula* was likely inspired by Irish folklore and is an excellent example of Irish influence on Norse culture.

The original settlement in Iceland featured primarily Norse and Irish inhabitants. The majority of the men were Norse and the majority of the women were Irish, most of which were the wives of Norse men. It seems as though most of the slaves in Iceland were Irish, although there were also free Irish settlers. Christianization did not end slavery but limited the murder of slaves. Many places and persons in Iceland had names with Irish Gaelic origins, and Icelandic poetry also contains elements from Ireland. The high proportion of Irish people in Iceland affected Icelandic identity. One of the most important Icelandic Sagas, *Laxdæla Saga*, features a man who embraces his Norse and Irish heritage. The combination of Norse and Irish culture, language, and identity created a unique Icelandic identity. The people of Iceland were not necessarily of completely Norse culture or Irish culture but a hybrid between the two.

In the case of the western Viking Expansion, Norse-Irish interactions and Irish enslavement influenced the Norse culture. While certain aspects of Norse culture persisted, such as *Things*, complex law-making and law codes, and clothing, other aspects changed and began to demonstrate Irish qualities. Language and names became combinations of Old Norse and Irish Gaelic. Norse poetry and folklore also contained Irish influences. Marriage between the Norse and the Irish created hybrid settlements and communities in Ireland and Iceland. Irish settlers, freed Irish slaves, and the children of Norse-Irish unions also contributed to some of these hybrid communities, particularly in Iceland. These communities contained elements from both cultures including language, literature, and poetry. As the two cultures interacted and integrated into communities, individuals began to identify as both Norse and Irish. This occurred particularly in Iceland where a unique Icelandic culture and identity was formed.

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Figure 1: Thor's Viking Ship - Epic Rap Battles of History Wiki - Wikia

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Figure 2: Viking Expansion

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Figure 4: Sagas of Icelanders

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