

## Female Dwarfs and Dwarf Children

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In this talk, I argue that the family life of the saga dwarfs is important not only for the image of the dwarfs themselves, but also for understanding of the relationships between dwarfs and humans in Old Norse-Icelandic sagas. The family life of the dwarfs in the saga literature has not received much attention yet. Many of the scholars who have written about Old Norse-Icelandic dwarfs, state that dwarfs are all male, i.e., that female dwarfs simply do not exist. One should expect then that the dwarfs have no family life either. However, in the sagas there are clear counter-examples to such claims. *Þjalar Jóns saga*, *Gibbons saga* and the younger *Bósa saga* mention *dyrgjur*, that is, female dwarfs, the dwarf-wives. Furthermore, several other sagas (including, but not limited to, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Þorsteins þátr bæjarmagns*) tell about dwarfs and their children, a fact that indicates that dwarfs have families even if nothing is told about the dwarf-wives or dwarf-mothers in these sagas. The human hero meets dwarf-children in several sagas, and there are episodes where the human hero takes advantage of the situation or even consciously manipulates the adult dwarf by being nice towards his child/children. I argue that such episodes not only prove the fact that the saga dwarfs do have families, but also that these dwarfs are loving and devoted fathers. Even more importantly, the family life of the dwarfs plays an important role in relationships between dwarfs and humans in the sagas. The source texts show that the emotional life of the dwarfs is much richer, and the relationships between dwarfs and humans are far more complex, than many previous scholars have recognized.

# FEMALE DWARFS AND DWARF CHILDREN

A NEGLECTED ASPECT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DWARFS  
AND HUMANS IN THE SAGAS

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# Questions in focus

- The relationship between dwarfs and humans in the saga literature
- Does the family life of the dwarfs play any significant role for the above-mentioned relationship, and if yes, what is this role?

# Hypothesis

- The family life of the dwarfs is important not only for the dwarfs themselves, but also for the relationship between the dwarfs and the humans in the sagas

# Characterization of the dwarfs by some previous scholars

- Dvergenes viktigste syssel var smedarbeid, og i det kunne ingen måle seg med dem. Alle ypperlige våpen og kostelige klenodier som vi hører om i de eldste sagn, var gjort av kunstferdige dverger. *Dvergene var hatske på guder og mennesker* og var uvillige til å arbeide for dem. Når de var nødt til det, søkte de gjerne å gi sitt verk en trolldomsaktig uhellbringende egenskap så eieren fikk liten glede av det.

Munch 1967: 80, emphasis added – UM

- The chief occupation of the Dwarfs was that of smith, in which they had no rivals. All the most notable weapons and all the precious gems mentioned in the oldest myths were the work of cunning Dwarfs. *The Dwarfs hated both gods and men* and were unwilling to do them service; if nevertheless they were compelled to do so, they strove to give their handiwork some magic quality of evil omen so that it brought little joy to any one who came into possession of it.

Munch 1926: 41,  
translated by Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt,  
emphasis added – UM

# Characterization of the dwarfs by some previous scholars

- The Sámi stereotypical features in Old Scandinavian literature have resulted from the interaction between the real features of the Sámi, features and motifs from Sámi folklore, and the stereotypical features of Scandinavian supernatural beings expressing the idea of otherness (giants and dwarves), the prevailing features of the giants being negative (the hostile others), *the prevailing features of the dwarves being positive (the friendly others)*.

Kusmenko forthcoming (to appear in 2014): [without page number],  
emphasis added – UM

# Characterization of the dwarfs by some previous scholars

- We may conclude that these features belong to the dwarfs though not defining them completely: of a craftsman who lives mysteriously in stone and rock in distance from the community he may serve and whose position before gods or heroes may be described by one or more of the following adjectives: *helpful, deprived, insulted, vengeful*.

Motz 1977: 49, emphasis added – UM

# The family life of the dwarfs

- “Dwarfs are all male, and they arose asexually, molded from the earth or generated in giant’s blood (*Völuspá*, st. 9). They do not engage in fruitful sexual encounters.” (Motz 1993: 623)
- “There are not, in fact, any female dwarves in the whole of Old Norse myth, as both Motz (1973; 1981–2, 240) and Steinsland (1983, 85) have noted, with the exception of a very late feminine form *dyrgja* in *Þjalar Jóns saga*.” (Clunies Ross 1994: 168)



# The family life of the dwarfs

- “Only with the development of late medieval story telling and the efflorescence of medieval romances did female dwarfs appear in oral and written tradition” (Lieberman 2002: 262)
- “The evidence of a 14<sup>th</sup> century text would have been of no consequence if the word in question were *\*dvergja*, but *dyrgja* looks like having the zero grade of ablaut ( $y < *u$  b *i*-umlaut), as opposed to *dvergr*, which displays the normal grade (*e*). If this impression is true, this noun must be old and needs an explanation” (Lieberman 2002: 261).

# The family life of the dwarfs

- I do not share, however, Liberman's view that the evidence from a late saga would have been of no consequence if the noun in question were an innovation.
- One can research late sagas and treat them as valuable *per se*.
- Werner Schäfke has discovered two more female dwarfs (*dyrgjur*) in the saga literature, which makes the total of three *dyrgjur*. He writes: "Das sind Svama in der *Þjalar Jóns saga*, eine unbenannte *dyrgja* in der jüngeren *Bósa saga* und eine ebenfalls unbenannte *dyrgja* in der Hs. AM 585c, 4° der *Gibbons saga*" (Schäfke 2010: 270).

# The family life of the dwarfs

- In *Þjalar Jóns saga* it says:

Gestr geck jnn j steinin, ok vtt litlo sidar, ok med honum duergr ok **dyrgja**; þau voro lag ok skamt vpp klofin, skamleit ok nasa braut. Þau heilsa Eireki konssyni, enn hann spurdi þau ath nafni. Duergr svarar: “Ek heiti Suammr, enn **kerling minn Suama.**”

Þjalar Jóns saga, chapter 6, p. 10

- In *Bósa saga* it says:

Dugi ei mitt fylgi, þá skal **dyrgja** mín koma í leikinn og mun ei auðsókt, et ei nægir. [...] Kom nú **dyrgja** hans og kvað nú illa hafa til tekist, að dvergurinn væri sem að dauða kominn; Litur það hana ei um þat hirða, því þeir bræður hafa líf latið.

Bósa saga, chapter 6, pp. 86, 92

- In *Gibbons saga* it says:

þar kom vt or eirn dvergr og heilsar a þä, enn þeir töko honum uel, enn er þeir hafa vid talast leider hann (i.e., dvergrinn – UM) þa med ser jnn i berged og sau þeir þar øpru meginm diru smidju, enn hinu megin var **dyrgia** dvergsins

Gibbons saga, chapter 8, p. 37

# The family life of the dwarfs

- Furthermore, there are sagas which mention **dwarf-children** – and it seems that the dwarfs do have a family life, not unlike the humans.
- *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*,
- *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns*,
- *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (here Sindri the dwarf has both a son and a daughter),
- *Þjalar Jóns saga*,
- *Gibbons saga*,
- the younger *Bósa saga*,
- *Ectors saga*,
- *Viktors saga ok Blávus*,
- *Nítíða saga*,
- *Sigurðar saga þøgla* and
- *Sigrgarðs saga ok Valbrands* (Schäfer 2010: 272–275).
- One could also add *Norna-Gests þáttr* here, since it calls Reginn a dwarf (dvergr) and Hreiðmarr's son (sonr Hreiðmars).

# *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*

Egill fekk mikinn verk í höndina. En er tvær nætr váru liðnar, kom hann í höfn eina, ok lágu þar um nóttina. Gat Egill þá ekki borit af sér verkinn. Stóð hann þá upp ór sænginni, ok gekk Egill upp á skóginn. Kom hann þá at bekk einum. Þótti honum þat helzt fróit at hafa höndina niðri í læknum ok láta strauminn leika um sárit. Því næst sá Egill, út ór einum steini hvar kom eitt dvergsbarn. Þat sótti vatn í skjólu. Egill tók fingrgull af hendi sér með tönnum ok lét reka í skjóluna fyrir barnit, en þat hljóp inn í steininn. Litlu síðar kom dvergrinn út ok spurði, hvar maðr væri, er glatt hefði barn sitt. Egill sagði til sín ok sagði sér lítit skulu gull, meðan hann væri þanninn farandi. “Þat er illt at vita,” sagði dvergrinn, “ok far með mér inn í steininn.” Egill gerði svá. Tók dvergrinn þá at binda um stúfinn, ok tók ór verk allan, ok var gróinn um morguninn. Tók dvergrinn þá at smíða honum eitt sverð, en upp frá hjöltunum gerði hann fal svá langan, at upp tók yfir olbogann, ok mátti þar spenna at, ok var Agli svá hægt at höggva með því sverði sem heil væri höndin. Dvergrinn gaf honum marga góða gripi, ok skildu þeir með vináttu.

*Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, chapter 11, pp. 174–175

# *The Story of Egil One-Hand and Asmund Berserkers-Slayer*

Egil suffered a lot of pain from the arm. Two days later they came to another harbour and spent a night there. Egil couldn't stand the pain any longer so he got out of bed and took a walk into the forest. He came to a stream and seemed to get some relief by holding the arm in the water and letting it wash over the wound. Then Egil saw a dwarf child coming out of a rock with a pail to fetch water. Egil picked a gold ring off his finger with his teeth and let it slip into the bucket, and the child ran with it back into the rock. A little later a dwarf came out of the rock and asked who had been so kind to his child. Egil told him his name and added that the way things stood, gold wasn't much use to him. "I'm sorry to hear that," said the dwarf. "Come with me into the rock." So that's what Egil did. The dwarf began dressing the stump, and soon the pain had completely gone. In the morning the wound was healed. Then the dwarf set about making him a sword, and from the hilt he made a socket so deep, it reached up to the elbow, where it could be fitted to the arm. So now Egil found it easy to strike with the sword as if he still had the whole arm. The dwarf gave him a good many more things of value, and they parted the best of friends.

Egil and Asmund, *Seven Viking Romances*, translated by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards, p. 245

# Analysis

- The psychological aspect
- The moral aspect

# A parallel

The Sagas of Icelanders (also known as Family Sagas) support the claim that a present obliges, cf. the following episode from «Egill's saga» (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*), where Einarr (Einarr Helgason Skálaglámm) leaves a valuable decorated shield at Egill's place and says it is a present for Egill; Egill himself is in the meantime not at home, so he cannot accept or refuse the present. When back at home and seeing the shield, Egill grows furious and says the following:

‘Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann at ek skyla þar vaka yfir ok yrkja um skjöld hans? Nú taki hest minn; skal ek ríða eptir honum ok drepa hann.’

Honum var þá sagt at Einarr hafði riðit snemma um morgininn; ‘mun hann nú kominn vestr til Dala.’

Síðan orti Egill drápu ok er þetta upphaf at:

*54. Mál er lofs at lýsa  
ljósgarð, er þá ek, barða,  
mér kom heim at hendi  
hodsendis boð, enda.  
Skalat at grundar Gylfa  
Glaums misfengnir taumar,  
hlýði þér til orða,  
jarðgróins mér verða.*

Egill ok Einarr heldu vináttu sinni meðan þeir lifðu báðir.

(Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson)

Thus, Egill One-Hand wants to enter a «friendship contract» with the dwarf in the same way as Einarr had entered with Egill Skalla-Grímsson, and Egill One-Hand uses the dwarf's child to ensure that the present is not refused.



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“That scoundrel! Does he expect me to stay awake making a poem about his shield? Fetch my horse, I will ride after him and kill him.”

Then he was told that Einar had ridden away early that morning – 'He will have reached Dalir by now.'

Then Egil made a drapa, which begins with this verse:

*54. It is time to light up with praise  
the bright bulwark I was given.*

*The sender of generosity's message  
reached me at my home.*

*I will steer the reins well  
of the sea-king's horse  
my dwarf's ship of verse.*

*Listen to my words.*

bright bulwark: shield

sea-king's horse: ship

dwarf's ship: poetry

Egil and Einar remained friends all their lives.

(Egil's Saga, transl. by Bernard Scudder)

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# Conclusion

- The hypothesis, that the family life of the dwarfs (especially the dwarfs' children) may play a significant role for the relationship between the dwarfs and the humans, is fully supported by *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*. The human hero manipulates the adult dwarf by behaving in a certain way towards the child of the dwarf. It seems that this is the only role the child plays in the saga. He (or she?) does not reappear in the saga later, so the only function the dwarf-child has in the text, is to make sure that the human hero gains the adult dwarf's benevolence and receives the help he needs.

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