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The Fashions of Snæfellsnes A Case Study of Clothing and Textiles in Four Sagas of Icelanders

Abstract

The sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) are an important part of European literary history. Both the sagas' historical background and their literary techniques were studied intensely in the last century, but dress and fashion in Old Norse–Icelandic literature received comparatively little attention in this period. Moreover, the literary corpus and textile history have rarely been used to illuminate one another; however, as this article will demonstrate, synthesising data and methodological approaches from both fields can yield new knowledge about both historical textiles and the sagas.

This article focuses on four of the sagas of Icelanders that are set on the Snæfellsnes peninsula: *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, and *Víglundar saga*. The central question the article poses is, how are social norms and cultural ideas reflected in clothing and textiles in these sagas? This study presents a comprehensive and multifaceted view of the textile and clothing imagery by combining qualitative and quantitative textual analysis showing how the imagery is an integral part of the narrative rather than an embellishment.

The article reveals that clothing and textiles serve an array of functions in the sagas which are linked to the societal order. Several themes — such as masculinity, social rank, and the practice of magic — are shown to have a close connection with clothing as well as other textiles.

Keywords: Sagas, Snæfellsnes, dress, clothes, textiles

Introduction

Clothing and its significance in the sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) has received a fair amount of scholarly attention (Falk 1919, Hughes 1971, Hansen 1979, Roscoe 1992 and more recently Ewing 2006, Straubhaar 2005, Zanchi 2007, Toplak 2011, Ranković 2013 and Sauckel 2014 among others). The recent surge of scholarship indicates a varied interest in the topic with many claiming to cover the subject matter across the corpus of Old Norse–Icelandic literature, or more specifically the sagas of Icelanders.

This article will take a different approach and focus on four family sagas that mainly take place on the Snæfellsnes peninsula: *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Bjarnar saga*, *Víglundar saga* and *Bárðar saga*. A brief overview of the history and plot of each saga is included in a separate section. The limited number of texts has allowed a comprehensive list of clothing and textile references to be gathered, which in turn has proven to be an essential tool in qualitative analysis because an exhaustive overview of the topic can only be obtained by examining all of the evidence. The aim of this article is to explore how social norms and cultural ideas are reflected in clothing and textile imagery with focus on using and subverting existing power structures by means of name-giving, magic, power-dressing, building a wealth and more.

The groundwork for this article was my MA thesis (Sepp 2018). The research has been updated, revised and condensed for the purposes of this article.

The sagas of Snæfellsnes

This article focuses on four family sagas that mainly take place on the Snæfellsnes peninsula (*Snæfellingasögur*). The geographically motivated corpus includes sagas from different time periods and influences, which makes the corpus rather diverse and interesting, while the size remained manageable.

Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa

Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa (*The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardale People*) was probably written in the first half of the 13th century, although it is set in the 11th century. The principal manuscript of the saga (AM 551 d α 4^ox) is from the 17th century, while two manuscript pages survive from the 14th century (AM 162 F fol). The rest of the manuscripts (Rask 28, AM 488 4^ox, AM 71 fol^x) are dated to the 18th century in the standard *Íslensk fornrit* edition (ÍF III: LXXXVII–XCVII). In addition, a translation by Alison Finlay published in *The Sagas of Warrior–Poets* (*The Saga of Bjorn* 2002: 151–222) is referenced in the article.

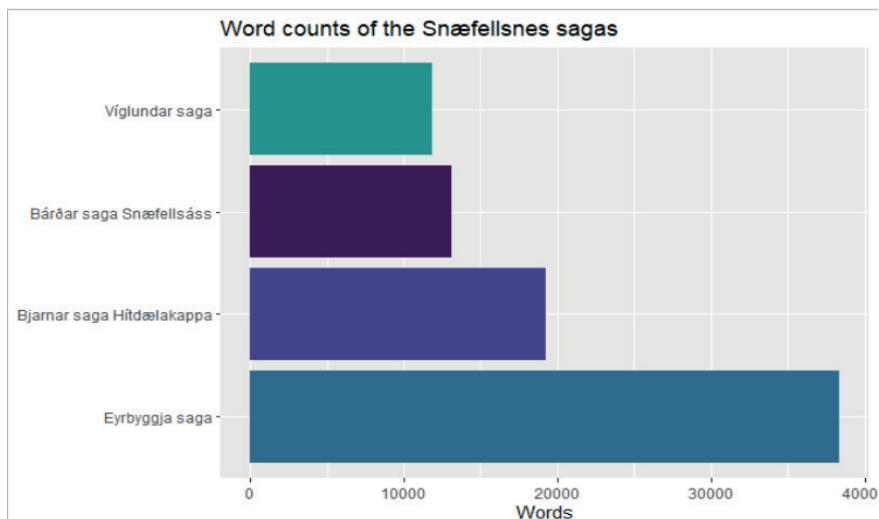


Figure 1. Word counts of the Snæfellsnes sagas.

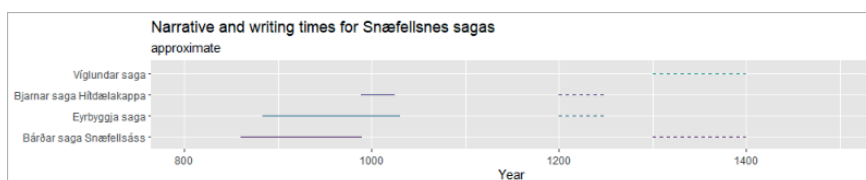


Figure 2. Approximate narrative and writing time for the Snæfellsnes sagas. Viglundar saga is considered fictional and has no estimation on narrative time.

Bjarnar saga revolves around the lifelong conflict between two men, Bjorn and Thord. Thord is fostered by Bjorn's father, but Bjorn chooses to be fostered in turn as a result of Thord's bullying. Bjorn falls in love with his foster father's daughter Oddny and is betrothed to her before leaving for Norway. Thord deceitfully marries Oddny and when Bjorn learns of the marriage in Norway, he does not return to Iceland before Oddny has birthed at least eight children.

The saga is pierced with the men's conflict and includes slanderous verses, accusations of homosexuality as well as several assaults on each other's lives culminating in Thord killing Bjorn. Oddny becomes severely disabled after learning the news and might be considered the main driver of the saga, who sadly has very little agency and suffers due to her husband's scheming, stubbornness and fragile masculinity.

Eyrbyggja saga

Eyrbyggja saga takes place between 884 and 1031 and was probably composed sometime in the first half of the 13th century. The manuscripts are mainly from the 14th century (ÍF IV 1935, XXXIII–XXXIV, XLV, LVII–LXIV). In addition to the standard edition, a translation by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards published in *The Icelandic Sagas volume 1* (IS 1 1999, 279–384) was used.

Eyrbyggja saga stands out in the genre for not having a central character, although Snorri Godi as the leading chieftain is a significant character. The saga starts off with a description of political circumstances in Norway and the subsequent emigration of a few people who will settle on the Snæfellsnes peninsula. The first larger conflict is between the Thorsnesings and the Kjall-eklings. During this time, Snorri Godi emerges as a political player who starts off with a magnificent lying in dress manoeuvre upon his return from Norway. This is followed by Snorri Godi's conflict with Arnkel Thorolfsson, which evolves into a conflict with Bjorn Asbrandsson.

Towards the end of the saga, a woman called Thorgunna arrives from the Hebrides with a splendid chestful of textiles. Snorri's sister Thurid invites Thorgunna to stay in the hope of obtaining some of the fortune. Thorgunna soon dies, and a series of deaths occur because her items are not dealt with in the manner she prescribed. The saga ends with Snorri defeating a marauder called Ospak and his band, another ghost is laid to rest and then Snorri dies in old age.

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss

Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss (*Bard's Saga*) is a late family saga that probably originates from the 14th century and the earliest surviving manuscript, the Pseudo-Vatshyrna, is from the beginning of the 15th century. The saga takes places in the 9th and 10th centuries (ÍF XIII, XCVIII–XCIX). In addition to the standard edition (ÍF XIII), Sarah M. Anderson's translation published in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders, volume 2* (CSI 2 1997, 237–266) is used.

Bard is born in northern Norway to a half-troll, half-giant called Dumb and a woman called Mjoll. As a grown man, he decides to emigrate to Iceland with a diverse company. In Iceland, Bard's daughter Helga is set on an ice bank by Bard's half-brother Thorkel Raudfeldsson's son. In retaliation, Bard kills his brother's sons as well as his brother and afterwards decides to retreat from society. His name was lengthened to mean Snæfell-deity (*Snæfellsáss*) as people are said to have worshipped him on the peninsula, with many receiving help in times of difficulty after calling on him.

Several of these instances are recounted alongside other scenes, most often including perilous weather. Bard will father another son called Gest

who is fostered by his daughter Helga, who has casually drifted to Greenland then travelled to Norway in the meantime. Gest is the main character of the last part of the saga. He joins the court of King Olaf Tryggvason, where at Christmas, the ghost of the mythical King Raknar appears and promises to award his treasures to anyone brave enough. Gest is equipped by King Olaf and successfully loots the mound in Helluland (Baffin Island). Gest dies in his baptismal clothes back in Norway because he has disregarded the ghost of his father who had advised against adopting Christianity.

Víglundar saga

Víglundar saga (*Víglund's Saga*) was probably composed no earlier than the 14th century, although the saga itself takes place in the 10th century. The saga is preserved in two manuscripts, one from the 15th century and the other from the 15th or 16th century (ÍF XIV, XXIII–XXIV and XXXII). In addition, the translation by Marianne Kalinke published in *The Sagas of Warrior-Poets* (*Víglund's saga* 2002, 223–268) was used.

The saga is rather different in tone and plot from classic family sagas as the influence of European romance is notable. The eponymous Víglund is the son of Thorgrim and Olof, who have eloped from Norway in order to pursue their love. Víglund's own love of Ketilrid does not result in marriage at the outset due to the resistance and scheming of Ketilrid's mother, Thorbjorg. Víglund and his sidekick of a brother, literally called Trusty (Trausti), go through a series of perils, while Ketilrid is married twice. In the last episode, the extended families are gathered and Ketilrid's marriage is revealed to have been put on for the lovers' protection, and they are united at last.

Methods

The analysis of this study was two-fold: in the first phase, I gathered all the clothing, textile and textilework references from the prose of the sagas of Snæfellsnes, and in the second phase I used qualitative methods in order to gain both an overview of and insight into the textile imagery used. I collected all instances of the clothing manually from all the four sagas, both from the *Íslensk Fornrit* standard editions and English translations, which I then assembled into a database. The database included the relevant sections, page and chapter numbers, the item, colour, material, the gender of the owner and whether it was a proper name. This resulted in a total of 272 entries (Sepp 2018).

I made a revised enquiry for this article in 2020 using the digital Saga Corpus (Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson and Sigrún Helgadóttir 2011; accessed through Malfong.is). I subsetted the relevant sagas and converted these to a token-

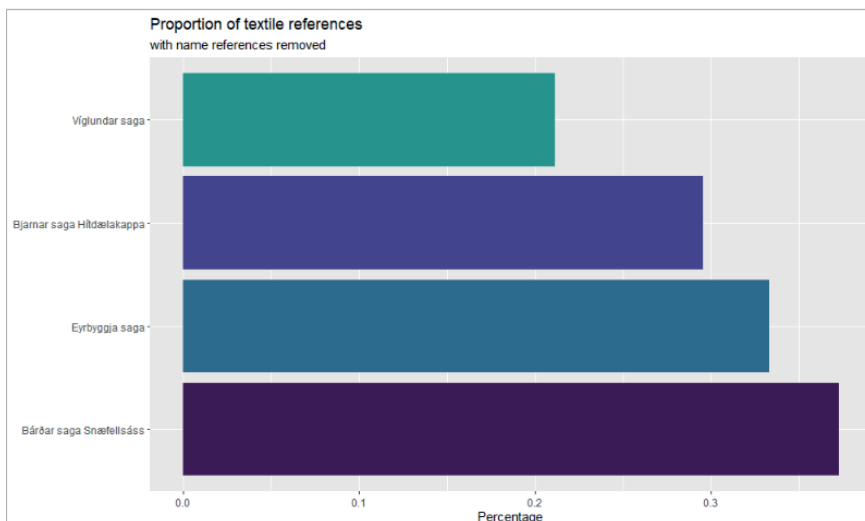


Figure 3. Percentage of textile references with name references removed.

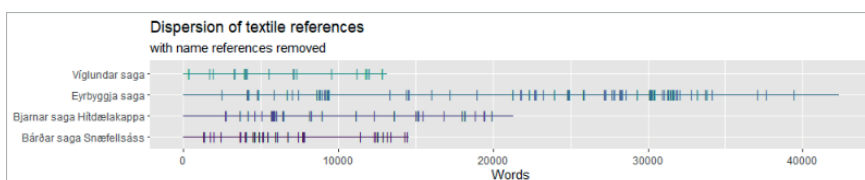


Figure 4. Dispersion of textile references with name references removed.

per-row database. I ran an automated query with terms from the first database, then checked the results and made adjustments. The revised database contains 311 entries. This is partly due to a few references that I had missed in manual gathering and partly because of differences in the structure of the database (for example, noun phrases such as *vandað skikkja* (a finely made cloak) are now considered separate entries).

The sagas differ in their proportion of textile references. There are names containing textile references and these are removed from the plots above as they would skew the numbers due to their repetition. As is evident, the Snæfellsnes sagas differ considerably in the proportion of textile references.

Additionally, the dispersion chart indicates that textile references occur in clusters and that there are distinct gaps in between. Whether these inclinations towards clustering of references, their proportion and selection of terms is due to individual variation or correlates with another factor, such as

the time of writing or interval between the time of writing and time of narrative, will have to be determined by an analysis incorporating more sagas.

Due to the fact that there are several centuries between the time of writing and the narrative time (as shown in Figure 2 above), and that in that time a significant sartorial shift from Viking Age dress to Medieval fashion took place, it is only natural to expect the narrative to provide clues on which period is depicted. However, as becomes evident when looking at the data, the textile references are mainly generic enough as to not warrant that distinction. Hence it is out of the scope of this article to date the texts or the clothing on the basis of sartorial clues, yet the references provide plenty of insight into the workings of Icelandic society and the norms that were implicitly and explicitly reinforced¹.

Identification

Names reference textiles

That clothes carry significant communicative value is evident in the Snæfellsnes sagas, where identification is at the forefront of the reference. This includes naming people after a certain garment as well as identifying a person based on their clothing.

Several characters, such as Thorgrim the Elegant (*Þorgrím inn þrúði*) have received nicknames inspired by their clothing. Thorgrim the Elegant is a central character in *Víglundar saga* and is mentioned once in *Bjarnar saga*. In addition to Thorgrim, *Víglundar saga* mentions Thorkel Skin-swathed (*Þorkell skinnvefja*) once. *Eyrbyggja saga* mentions Ragnar Shaggy Breeches' sons (*Ragnarssonar loöbrókar*) and Hauk High Breeches (*Hauk hábrók*) once.

The bulk of the examples occur in *Bárðar saga*: Red-cloak the Strong (*Rauðfeld inum sterka*), his son Thorkel Raudfeldsson, an enslaved woman Skin-breeches (*Skinnbrók*), Thorkel Skin-swathed (*Þorkell skinnvefja*), Thórir Leatherneck (*Þórir léðrhals*), Skeggi Skin-Björn's son (*Skeggi Skinna-Bjarnarson*), as well as two women versed in magic, Hetta (i.e. a type of hood) and Kolla of Torfa with the nickname Skin-cap (*Torfár-Kolla hét, en Skinnhúfa öðru nafni*).

One of the most interesting is Thorkel Skin-swathed, who is said to have been brought up “north of Dumbshaf. It was difficult to come by homepun cloth there, and the boy was swaddled in seal skins for warmth” (CSI 2, 436). There are very few places in Scandinavia, where it would have been hard to find wool cloth, the most likely is the Arctic (i.e., north of Dumbshaf), where people would struggle to keep sheep. The backstory is followed by a particularly grotesque description of Thorkel's appearance. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir

1 For recent discussions on the relations of historiography and fiction in the Icelandic sagas, see O'Connor (2017) and Würth (2005).

(2017: 336–337) has identified similar descriptions of the Sami people, and this is further corroborated by the lack of wool cloth.

Most of the people with clothing-themed nicknames are disadvantaged in the eyes of the society in one way or another. For example, Thorgrim the Elegant was born out of wedlock (ÍF XIV, 68) and is fostered by king Harald, who values him highly, so he becomes *sæmiliga klæddr* (ÍF XIV, 70; 'becomingly dressed'). However, he is ridiculed and seen as rising above his rightful place (ÍF XIV, 70), which could have similarities with Olaf Peacock (*Ólafr Pái*) in *Laxdæla saga*, who was also born out of wedlock but is given this nickname by his father (*Laxdæla saga*, 297).

Thorkel Skin-swathed seems to belong to an ethnic minority, while Redcloak the Strong is descended from giants (ÍF XIII, 105). Skin-breeches is enslaved and Hetta and Kolla of Torfa practice magic, which means that they are inhabiting liminal spaces in one way or another. Although Thorgrim the Elegant establishes himself in society, the nickname could possibly be an ever-present derogatory reminder of his lineage, because men of higher birth, such as Bjorn Asbrandsson and Thorleif Kimbi, are not mocked in the same way (as discussed below).

Supernatural beings

Another category of identification, unrelated to naming, is when people become near-synonymous with their clothing. Here again, we can see liminal characters – Bard is considered a deity on the peninsula, and Odin and Thor need no introduction.

Most notably, Bard in *Bárðar saga* is almost one with his grey cowl (*grá kuff*): “He was usually clad in a grey cowl with a walrus-hide rope around him, and a cleft staff in his hand with a long and thick gaff” (CSI 2, 248; *Han var svá optast búinn, at hann var í grám kuffli ok swardreip um sik, klafarkerlingu í hendi ok í fjaðrbrodd langan ok digran.* (ÍF XIII, 129)). The presence of the grey cowl is repeated a total of four times throughout the saga with the repetition lending the garment a ritual quality, as if Bard and the cowl are inextricably linked.

Bard is wearing the grey cowl when he rescues a fisherman called Ingjald from certain death at sea caused by the witchcraft of Hetta and enacted by a fisherman called Grim, who suddenly appears from an unexpected fog. Grim is one of the attested names of Odin (Orchard 1997, 189). Ingjald, who is close to death, lies in the bottom of his boat and drapes his fur cloak (*skinnfeldur*) over himself, calling on Bard, who soon arrives. Jane Roscoe (1992, 252–271) has interpreted similar episodes as forms of supernatural communication, which seems to be the case here too.

The number of concealing hoods is remarkable, as *hetta*, *grimur* and *kúfl* are all hooded garments. Bard was considered a deity. People believing Grim to have been Thor (ÍF XIII, 127) combined with the magic of Hetta and Ingjald's cloak of communication make this intersection of clothing and the supernatural a motif that would certainly warrant further research using a wider circle of source texts.

Curiously enough, although Grim's attire is not described, he is said to have had a red beard, something that matching descriptions of Thor from the fishing (Orchard 1997, 161–162). The red beard makes another appearance later in the saga, when Bard's son Gest makes his journey to ransack mythical King Raknar's tomb in Helluland. Again, north of Dumbshaf, a man called Raudgrani (*Rauðgrani*, literally Redbeard) asks to join Gest on his journey. He has a single eye and “wore a blue-spotted cape with a hood, which buttoned all the way down to his feet” (CSI 2, 262; [H]ann hafði bláflekkotta skautheklu ok knepptu niðr í milli fóta sér (ÍF XIII, 163)). He is killed by the Christian priest onboard and is subsequently identified as Odin, despite Orchard (1997, 189) attributing a grey beard to Odin.

Odin's clothing in this case is also consistent with his attire in a legendary saga, *The Saga of Volsungs*, where he makes an appearance in chapter 3 in “a blue spotted cloak” (author's translation; *flekkotta yfir sér* (*Völsunga saga* 1943)) and in chapter 11 in “a hat and a blue cloak” (author's translation; *með síðan hött ok hekle blá* (*Völsunga saga* 1943)) which would indicate that at least in the 14th century Odin was associated with wearing a blue hooded cloak that was most likely spotted.

This indicates that both sagas are informed by European trends, as patterning was systematically used in the visual arts to depict “evil men, especially enemies of the Christian faith” (Mellinkoff 1993, 20). In addition, functional buttons only became common in European fashion around the 13th century (Kania 2010, 108), i.e. several centuries after the saga takes place, which also means that the garment description is anachronistic for the saga time but not for writing time.

Visual identification

In the pre-industrial era, people had far fewer items of clothing than is customary in the global North today. Accordingly, identifying somebody from a distance based on their clothing is a recurring theme in the sagas of Snæfellsnes.

Eyrbyggja saga chapter 20 features the only woman wearing a navy hooded cape (*blá skikkja*), that is, Geirrid, who helps Thorarin, Arnkel and their twelve men to find Odd, who has been concealed by his mother Katla. Both Geirrid and Katla are said to be well-versed in magic (*fjölkyrnig*) and the scene is rich

in textile imagery. The men have made three futile attempts to find Odd when Katla is informed that fourteen people are approaching, plus “one in coloured clothing” (IS 1, 307; *einn í litklæðum* (ÍF IV, 53).

It is remarkable that although the men have set off with the clear intention of killing, apparently not one of them has put on elaborate clothing. Dyeing was resource-heavy before the 19th century because natural dyes require several steps in addition to making the fabric itself and was thus only done on better garments. Katla immediately identifies this to be Geirrid, but still removes cushions (*hægindi*) from the dais and hides her son in there while replacing the furnishings. Katla senses a harder battle approaching and when Geirrid enters, she dramatically throws off her navy cape and encases Katla’s head in a sealskin bag (*selbelg*) after which she directs the men to Odd. The bagging possibly has wider significance, as in *Völsunga saga* (1943) chapter 40 Svanhild’s gaze prevents horses from trampling her, but this is not the case when her head is enclosed in a bag. Katla suffers a similarly cruel death by stoning.

Thord Kolbeinsson is identified from a distance in *Bjarnar saga* chapter 11, as he also wears a navy cape (*blá kápa*) when riding to Bjorn’s farm. Bjorn’s mother Thordis, who is well aware of their relations, wisely says:

‘There is a man riding there,’ she said, ‘in a black cloak, looking very like Thord Kolbeinsson – it is him, too, and his business would be best left undone.’ ‘Not so,’ said Bjorn. [...] Thordis said, ‘It will be seen that I’m not very easily swayed by talk. Bear in mind, Bjorn, that the more fairly Thord speaks, the more falsely he thinks, so don’t you trust him.’ (*The Saga of Bjorn*, 170–171)

Beforehand, Oddny has also strongly advised against the invitation, but to no avail as she “is used in this relationship as a way of negotiating the sexually charged power relations between the two men” (Evans 2019, 57). The navy cape Thord is wearing while riding is not a direct sign of impending violence as has been widely believed (Straubhaar 2005, 53), but rather Thord has power-dressed in order to assert dominance over Bjorn. In conjunction, Straubhaar also concludes that wearing certain items, carrying weapons and killings “may occur in quick succession with or without any causal relationships among them [and are] neither necessarily mutually exclusive nor mutually linked” (Straubhaar 2005, 65). The charged power struggle between Thord and Bjorn carries through Bjorn’s subsequent stay at Thord’s farm and through to chapter 32 where Thord finally kills Bjorn.

Another episode of visual identification in the Snæfellsnes sagas is in fact indicative of murderous intentions, but here it is interrupted thanks to the attire. In *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 41, the Thorbrandssons are attacking Arn-

bjorn when the Breidvikings “caught sight of someone in coloured clothing on top of the farmhouse roof at Bakki; they knew it was not Arnbjörn’s style of dress” (IS 1, 343). The Breidvikings rush to back up Arnbjorn, although it is Snorri Godi who calls off the Thorbrandssons.

Positive identification by the elaborate clothing (*skrúðklæði*) not being Arnbjorn’s style (*var eigi búnaður Arnbjarnar*) (ÍF IV, 114) has already been set up in chapter 40, upon the arrival of brothers Bjorn and Arnbjorn (ÍF IV, 106–107), where it is said that although Arnbjorn returned as a wealthy man, he was not one for show (*engi áburðarmaður*) in contrast to his more handsome brother who continued to wear European fashions and dress fancily (*áburðarmaður mikill*). However, as it is said that all the merchants who had returned, went to the thing in dyed clothing (*í litklæðum*), the reader can rest assured that Arnbjorn had an expensive set of clothing, although apparently he would never wear it while thatching his roof.

Lying in dress

The ability to communicate meaning or read meaning into clothing raises the possibility of deceiving the audience on purpose. Power and who gets to wield it are central themes in the two scenes discussed below.

In *Víglundar saga* chapter 8 (ÍF vol XIV 1959, 76–78), Thorgrim the Elegant’s wife Olof executes a magnificently bold lying in dress manoeuvre by moving up the masculinity scale. The brothers Einarr and Jökull set out to rape Olof in order to humiliate Thorgrim. Similarly to *Bjarnar saga*, the woman is the one caught in the power play. The plan is thwarted by Olof’s good household management and quick wit. Firstly, the men’s door is locked every day after the men have left and thus the assailants cannot enter of their own accord. Secondly, Olof drapes her mantle (*möttul*) over her maid and instead, enters the room in a navy cape (*blá kápa*) with a drawn sword. Her performance of masculinity is so assertive that the men are “somewhat afraid of him” (*Víglund’s saga* 2002, 236) and make their escape when Olof further bluffs saying Thorgrim is approaching with a large band of men.

The masculinity aspect has recently been analysed by Gareth Evans (2020, 59–75), but from a textiles point of view, it is astonishing that according to the narrative, the mere exchange of an outer garment plus the phallically bare sword are enough to radically change a person’s gender presentation, especially as outer garments were generally quite basic and androgynous in their cut. Verifying the exact cut of *möttuls* and *kápas* has so far been impossible as to my knowledge no full garments with attached labels have been found.

In the other instance, the masculinity of the character is downplayed on purpose. In *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 13, Snorri Godi wears the only black (*svar-*

tr) garment in the Snæfellsnes sagas. Snorri travels to Norway with his foster brothers at the ripe old age of fourteen winters and gets fifty ounces of silver from his uncle Bork as travel money. Upon their return to Iceland the following year Thorleif Kimbi is a wonder to look at with the best horse he could afford and a splendid set of weapons, and of course “all his clothes were of the finest quality” (IS 1, 41; *vönduð öll klæði* (ÍF IV 1935, 293)). Whereas Snorri enters on a “fine black mare”, his old-fashioned saddle and modest undyed black cape (*svart kápa*) so underwhelming that he is thought to have dishonourably failed to manage his money during his travels, making him a laughing stock. At the same time, Thorleif had spent almost all his money on the elaborate attire, something that is portrayed as an entirely valid choice.

In the winter, Snorri and Bork fall out further, although Snorri already has hard feelings for Bork because he killed Snorri’s father shortly before his birth. The next chapter reveals that Snorri has outmanoeuvred his uncle because he sets a low price for Snorri’s half of their shared property believing Snorri has not got the means to buy him out (based on Snorri’s humble looks upon his return), thinking that he will get the property cheaply instead. However, Snorri has cleverly concealed his riches and within a matter of a few paragraphs Bork loses the farm, islands, home and wife.

Snorri’s fortune is cunningly revealed from under his foster father Thorbrand’s cloak (*kápa*). The purse (*sjóð*) contained 120 ounces of silver, half of which is still in Snorri’s possession after the incident.

Another cloak, this time a *skikkja* fills a similar purpose in *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 27, where a woman called Thorgerd is frustrated by the lack of revenge taken after her husband’s murder and is advised to dig it up and show it to Arnkel, who is responsible for taking revenge. Thorgerd duly remarks that “they were sparing her neither trouble nor misery” (IS 1, 316), but does it anyway. She goes to visit Arnkel and surprises him by producing the head from under the cloak, saying: “Here is the head which would never have shirked action on your behalf if that had been needed” (IS 1, 316). The trouble and the misery pay off and her husband’s killing is prosecuted next spring.

The power dynamics of Icelandic society are often very complex and as is seen from the examples above, should be carefully considered in order to get results. It should always be born in mind that masculinity is king (for an elaborate discussion on the topic, see Evans 2019). Snorri’s outfit upon his return deliberately sends false messages about his financial situation in order to gain the upper hand in the long run, while Olof employs hypermasculinity to good effect to protect her and her maids’ bodies as well as her husband’s reputation. They both achieve their goals by knowingly altering their appearance to manipulate peoples’ perceptions of them. Thorgerd uses her cloak less for de-

ception but rather to catch Arnkel by surprise and use the affect to elicit action. However, it is clear that both women have to align themselves with the masculine in order to have an impact.

Textiles of wealth

All textiles were inherently valuable because everything was made by hand and the raw materials were generally grown locally, hence the investment of time and skill was considerable. In this light, things that were of foreign origin were appreciated to an extent that will generally be unfathomable to the modern audience. This might be one of the reasons why luxury garments make up a considerable portion of the textiles in the sagas. I will demonstrate in the following section how the function of high-status clothing can be variable: it can be used for identification, to assert one's masculinity or to protect the wearer by magic or proxy, as well as being a commodity in the gift economy.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 44 a man called Steinthor arrives at Snorri Godi's doorstep with sixty men in a conspicuous red tunic (*í rauðum kyrtili*), "a fine shield and helmet, and at his waist a splendidly ornamented sword" (IS 1, 347) that is described in detail, to seemingly deliver a payment for the life of one of the people Snorri had enslaved. The whole mission is clearly provocative and insult is added to injury when one of the women comes in and remarks that "Steinthór is not only a fine-looking warrior; he also spoke very well when delivering the slave payment" (IS 1, 347). There is a clear demonstration of power in the size of the force and in the choice of weapons, words and outfit, although unfortunately for Steinthór, his elaborately ornamented sword is unfit for battle and needs frequent straightening. Looks do not win the battle and it ends in a truce.

Tunics (*kyrtill*), when they are mentioned in the Snæfellsnes sagas, seem to be precious more often than not: in *Bjarnar saga*, King Olaf bestows "a gold ring, a silken tunic trimmed with lace², and a fine sword" (*The Saga of Bjorn*, 163) upon Thord in exchange for a single *drápa*. The tunic makes a few reappearances in the saga and is obviously an item of note. Bjorn exchanges garters with the king by accident and it is said that Bjorn wore the silk garter all his life, even being buried with it (*The Saga of Bjorn*, 134). Curiously enough, the garter escapes attention until chapter 32, where Bjorn wears another precious tunic (*guðvefjarkyrtill*). The attentive audience might realise that Bjorn's time has come as the garter is mentioned again.

2 This is an unfortunate and anachronistic rendering of *pellskyrtill hlaðbúinn*, and is probably based on IED (1874, 269). Both ÍF III (1938, 127) and Falk (1919, 155) translate this as *ribbon* or *border*, probably referring to a tablet-woven embellishment, which was quite common in Viking Age and Medieval clothing.

Clothing gifts are not rare in the sagas of Snæfellsnes and elaborate items are recycled several times, as happens with one cloak that changes hands repeatedly in *Bjarnar saga* without losing its value (“Bjorn gave Thorfinna a gold ring and the costly woven tunic which King Olaf had given to Thord Kolbeinson, and which the king had given into Bjorn’s possession after the robbery on the Branno islands” (*The Saga of Bjorn*, 207)). In *Bárðar saga* chapter 12, Bard gives Thordis a beautiful set of women’s clothing in exchange for their son Gest. Gifting was a mechanism of maintaining the social order, and quite naturally textiles were incorporated into this.

Attitudes toward dressing expensively seem to be generally approving. In *Bárðar saga*, chapter 22, the Hjaltasons return to Iceland and attend the assembly “so well turned out [dressed] that men thought that the gods themselves had arrived” (CSI 2, 266). The accompanying verse mentions them wearing adorned helmets. This is very similar to the scene in *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 40 where the brothers Bjorn and Arnbjorn arrive at the thing in coloured clothing (see above). However, this approval does not extend to Thorgrim the Elegant, whose style is the focal point of bullying that is probably motivated by his being born from an extramarital affair, as discussed above.

The wealth of the aforementioned Arnbjorn is actually very humble and domestic. In chapter 39 of *Eyrbyggja saga*, he boards a ship at the last moment carrying three hundred ells of homespun wool cloth (*vaðmál*), twelve piled coats (*vararfeldir*) and his food for the voyage on his back (ÍF IV, 105). The narrative suggests that Arnbjorn’s wealth is derived from this baggage. The *vaðmál* was locally priced at 24 ells for an ounce of silver (ÍF IV 1935, 25), hence the price of a roll of fabric would be 12.5 ounces of silver domestically. The *vararfeldir* were set by law at a cost two ounces (Jochens 1995, 155) and were therefore worth 24 ounces of silver domestically. Hence, Arnbjorn leaves Iceland with goods worth 36.5 ounces of silver and returns with considerable wealth.

Based on archaeological evidence, it is also plausible, even if a bit exaggerated, that Arnbjorn carried all the cloth and the cloaks on his back. The legal *vaðmál* was two ells wide (98.4 cm). The fabric finds from the medieval period generally have 8–12 ends and 4–10 picks per centimetre (Hayeur Smith 2015, 30–33) and the requisite yarn possibly 6500 metres per kilo (Andersson 1999, 9). If we presume that Arnbjorn had with him finer cloth (more picks and ends per centimetre), the *vaðmál* would have contained the whereabouts of 386 kilometres of yarn and would have weighed approximately 59 kilos.

All of the requisite wool would have been shorn, sorted, washed, combed, spun, warped, woven and finished by hand. Estimates for the time spent on these tasks are difficult to find, although it has been reported that weaving on a warp-weighted loom took place at 1–1.5 ells a day (Hoffmann 1964, 215–

216), and that *vaðmál* would have taken the better part of a woman's yearly labour to weave. According to Eva Andersson (1999, 9), preparing the fibres and spinning them takes more time than weaving, so it can be assumed that Arnbjorn is carrying a roll of cloth that is the fruit of three years' worth of a single woman's labour, although the tasks were distributed in the household³.

Luxury textiles serve an array of purposes in the Snæfellsnes sagas ranging from a straightforward display of economic power (and by proxy, masculinity) to reinforcing social relations, although luxury can also be carved out of domestically produced cloth because it could be bartered in Europe. This array of functions vividly exemplifies how integral clothing was to the social relations of the Viking and Middle Ages.

Spaces of aggression

There are only a few depictions of textile production or the spaces for it. Not surprisingly, actual textile production is rarely mentioned, and even if it is, these descriptions do not include technological information.

Women had specialised workrooms (*dyngja*) where weaving took place. The three times the *dyngja* is mentioned in two sagas, it is only for male characters to walk in or out of. In *Bjarnar saga*, it is for Thord to flaunt Bjorn's severed head and signature jewellery, while in *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri Godi has to stop his dead father-in-law from groping a young woman. In *Víglundar saga*, the sewing room (*saumstofa*) is the backdrop for Olof's emergency performance of masculinity and a place for Ketilrid to weep.

Víglundar saga is the only saga to mention needlework in general terms (*hannyrðir*) and womanly arts (*kvenligar listir*), while *Eyrbyggja saga* mentions Katla spinning yarn using a distaff (*rokkr*) and weaving (*vaðverk*) in conjunction with Thorgunna.

The daily life of the Medieval Icelandic farm was possibly too familiar to warrant any narrative attention, although women are still not centred in their own spaces. This further exemplifies how in a patriarchal society, women are secondary to men; even in their own spaces their reactions to men's behaviour rather than women's own feelings and agency are prioritised in the narratives.

Protective garments

Different kind of overgarments that were needed to protect people from the elements are a frequent occurrence in the textile references, but there is also a handful of references that point at magical protection. The most prominent

3 This estimate does not contain the pile cloaks which would have taken considerably longer to weave as locks of wool were added to the fabric to make it look fluffy. For more on pile cloaks, see Elsa Guðjónsson (1962).

two categories are the newly made protective tunic and gifts from the Norwegian king.

The protective shirt has already been acknowledged as a motif in Old Norse–Icelandic literature by Inger Boberg (1966, 70, as cited in Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 2013, 57 and 152), yet is rarely discussed despite the motif being quite distinct. Furthermore, Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (2013, 47–58) has concluded that “magic is a weapon available to women in order to pursue their own ends; their ostensible motives are diverse but can be analyzed in terms of power and social position” (Jóhanna Katrín 2013, 53).

In *Bárðar saga* chapter 6, the *fjölkyunnig* (magic-wielding) widow Hildigunn responds to allegations of sorcery by presenting her son with a freshly made tunic (*nýgervan kyrtill*) and sending her other son Einar subsequently to pursue the accuser, Lon–Einar, alone (ÍF XIII 1991, 120–121). Although nothing is said of the entities of the tunic, it is said that seven of Lon–Einar’s men died, two of his enslaved servants escaped, and that they fought for a long time. Defeating at least nine men with only a shield and a sword, without sustaining any injuries, seems unlikely enough to suspect some help from the tunic. The end of Lon–Einarr comes when the Einarr with the tunic called on Bard and “the belt on Einar from Lon’s breeches came apart, and when he clutched at his breeches Einar dealt him his death blow” (CSI 2 1997, 245).

The death of Einar with its mixture of the supernatural and the pragmatic is humiliating, but in addition to the tunic, it is notable that he finds it essential to not fight breech-less, and that this costs him his life although not his dignity.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* chapter 18, Thorbjorn Digri sets out to search for his horses at the farm of Thorarin Svarti. One of the eleven men in Thorbjorn’s party is Odd Kotluson (Katla’s son), who is dressed on the journey in a freshly made brown tunic (IS 1, 297; *En þeir kómu í Holt til Kǫtlu, færði hon Odd, son sinn, í kyrtil móbrúnan, er hon hafði þá nýgort.* (ÍF IV 1935, 34)). At Thorarin’s farm, Geirrid laments her son Thorarin’s lack of courage and a fight breaks out. The saga explicitly mentions that no weapon could scathe Odd (ÍF IV 1935, 36). The battle is ended by Thorarin’s wife Aud who asks the women to throw clothes on the weapons. However, Aud’s hand is chopped off in the process⁴ and another battle ensues because Odd claims Thorarin himself had chopped off his wife’s hand. For the second time, the saga states that “Odd was unharmed, as no weapon could penetrate his tunic” (IS 1 1999, 299; *hann var ekki sárr, því*

4 “In the home-field at Mávahlið a human hand was found where the fighting had taken place. It was shown to Thórarin, and he saw that it was a woman’s hand. He asked where Auð was, and was told she was lying in her bed. He went in to see her and asked if she had been hurt. Auð told him not to worry about it, but he realised that her hand had been cut off.” (IS vol 1 1999, 298)

at eigi festi vápn á kyrtli hans (ÍF IV 1935, 37)). Everybody except Odd and a slave who flees the battle scene, are killed. This battle is what motivates the search for Odd, where Katla further protects him with her magic until she is rendered powerless by Geirrid, as discussed above.

The scenes are strikingly similar and occur elsewhere in the sagas of Icelanders, for example in the post-Reformation *Illuga saga Tagldarbana* (1953) – which also partly takes place on the Snæfellsnes peninsula – the tunic has transformed into an impenetrable coat of mail (*brynja*) that is buried in a mound with its owner Sorkvi. Needless to say, the fearless hero defeats the odds and obtains the coat of mail.

A similar story is recounted in *Bárðar saga* chapter 18, where Bard's son Gest is staying with King Olaf Tryggvason. On Christmas Eve, an imposing yet semi-decomposed figure in full armour, including a coat of mail, comes in, finds the hospitality lacking and before leaving offers his treasures to anyone who can prove themselves brave enough. He is soon identified by King Olaf as King Raknar of Helluland, and Gest is promptly assigned the task of ransacking Raknar's gravemound. Gest agrees on the condition that he is equipped by the king himself, which he agrees to: he is given a pair of magicians, a priest, "forty pair of iron shoes that were lined with down", a short sword, a length of cloth to wrap himself in while in the mound and a candle. On their journey, they encounter Raudgrani, as discussed above, and manage to cross a lava field thanks to the iron shoes.

Gest remarks on King Olaf's foresight, which is often the trait of women, and this combined with the encasing textile approximates King Olaf to the *fjölkyunnig* women while not discrediting him. The wrap protects Gest in the cave when he fights the zombie king, clearly indicating the length of cloth to be a cousin of the protective shirt.

The folklore motif of the protective shirt that is supplied by the mother occurs twice in the sagas of Snæfellsnes, aligning almost perfectly. Both Katla and Hildigunn lack the social capital, i.e. male relatives, to pursue their case and so they resort to magic as this is available to them. Similarly, King Olaf cannot provide any more protection to Gest than what he equips him with, and as expected every item, including the wrap, prove essential during the journey. The circumstances of the women and the king might be wildly different, yet their use of protective garments is eerily similar.

Bed matters

The sagas of Snæfellsnes provide ample battles, accidents and hauntings where people are killed. However, one of the most deadly and eventful narratives is in *Eyrbyggja saga* chapters 50 to 55, where a single woman called Thorgunna

arrives with quantities of “finery [...] which was difficult to obtain in Iceland” (IS 1 1999, 357). Snorri Godi’s sister Thurid, who is characterised as a vain woman, first tries to buy Thorgunna’s clothing, but after an unsuccessful attempt, invites her to stay with her hoping to “get some clothes from her by and by” (IS 1 1999, 357). Thorgunna accepts on the firm condition that she will decide for herself what she will hand over from her possession.

The plot thickens considerably when Thorgunna unpacks a magnificent set of bedclothes: fine English sheets (*enskar blæjur*), a silk quilt (*silkkult*), bed curtains (*rekkjurefill*), a full canopy (*ársall*) – people were astonished by these and “reckoned they had never seen the like before” (IS 1 1999, 357; ÍF IV 1935, 138). Thurid is green with envy and tries to buy the set, but is declined abruptly and things are left at that. Thorgunna is said to have worked with weaving and haymaking and being fond of the farmer’s son Kjartan.

Thorgunna dies after a blood rain, but gives Thurid’s husband Thorodd strict instructions on how to deal with her belongings along with a warning to not disregard them. Thurid is to get a precious cloak (*skarlatsskikkja*), the church she is to be buried at is to get a gold ring and all of the bed furnishings are to be burnt “for they will bring no good to anyone” (IS 1 1999, 359). Thorgunna is very open about the concern she has for possible mismanagement and the unfortune these things might inflict.

Thorgunna is described as a big and tall woman, as is Bard’s daughter Helga in *Bárðar saga*. Helga travelled to Greenland on an ice bank, then travels to Norway and back to Iceland with her love Skeggi who is married to another woman. Bard breaks them up and Helga is said to have been heartbroken after this. The saga further relates a winter in which Helga worked at a farm and how she spent sleepless nights behind the bed curtain. A man called Hrafn thinks he has the right to assault her on account of her beauty and her wearing only a shift (*Helga sat upp í einum serk* (ÍF XIII 1991, 124)), but she promptly breaks his arm and leg.

There is a definite resemblance between Helga and Thorgunna as they both have a bit of a backstory and arrive in slightly vague circumstances. These stories are also one of the few places in the Snæfellsnes sagas that mention bed furnishings. Again, a degree of otherness is associated with the occurrence of textiles.

The day after Thorgunna’s death, Thorodd tries to burn the incredible wealth, but Thurid entices him until he relents and only a previously unmentioned eiderdown (*dýnur*) and pillows (*hægendi*) are burnt. Meanwhile, Thorgunna is to be transported to the church, but the coffin bearers are treated poorly at a farm so she crawls out of her shroud, cooks for her men while

being unabashedly naked and leaves once finished. The people at the farm are so shaken that they decide to treat the coffin bearers a lot better.

Back at Froda, a lot of weird things occur – there is an ominous doom-moon in the house, people are beaten, they die and then continue haunting the farm, a seal appears in the fire pit, stares intently at Thorgunna's belongings and only Kjartan is able to bludgeon it back to the ground, Thorodd drowns with his crew, but they return every night to sit by the fire along with the previously deceased and there is a mysterious tail poking out of dried fish in the larder that pulls skin off people's palms (IS 1 1999, 361–364). Finally, when Thurid gets sick, Kjartan consults Snorri Godi, who suggest burning the bed furnishings and they hold a court session for all the ghosts of the dead people, after which everything returns to as normal as possible after the unnecessary death of 18 people due to sartorial envy. This is quite a substantial death count even by the very relaxed standards of the genre.

The degree of unhealthy attachment Thurid had for these textiles is quite understandable, because the narrative paints a picture of this exquisitely expensive set, although the story probably wouldn't have been included in the saga if it weren't as gory. The similarity of Thorgunna's and Helga's stories – their arrival, physical build, the significance of the sleeping quarters and the boys – is significant, although at the moment it remains unclear whether similar narratives are found elsewhere in the Medieval Icelandic literature or in other contemporary corpora. Although Thorgunna's involvement in the ensuing wave of deaths is not clear, she does know what is coming and asking these incredible luxuries be destroyed is something that has the potential to go sour. However, the similarities and the inclusion of the textiles remain significant and underline women's alignment to textiles when supernatural events occur, as well as the enormous and hardly fathomable value of luxury textiles in the medieval period.

Conclusion

Clothing and textiles are sites of communication, and accordingly, cultural ideas and social norms are intertwined with clothing, which both reflects and reinforces said ideas and norms. The context in which clothing is used is often overlooked, and closer inspection warrants plenty of fruitful insight and previously under-researched concepts.

This article has taken a novel approach to clothing research in the sagas by gathering all the existing clothing references into a database, which has allowed both for quantitative analysis of the 311 clothing references to gain an overview of the structure of the data, and knowledge from different fields to be combined for qualitative analysis.

The sagas of Snæfellsnes consist of four sagas of Icelanders that take place in the 10th and 11th centuries mainly on the Snæfellsnes peninsula in Iceland, yet the narratives themselves were probably written down in the 13th and 14th centuries. This gap is generally not detectable in the clothing references, although some traces exist, such as Raudgrani's attire in *Bárðar saga*, which has Medieval construction elements (buttons) and knowledge of European perceptions of the depiction of enemies of the religion.

Textiles and clothing imagery served a variety of functions in the Snæfellsnes sagas, from simple identification based on a person's clothing to having a proximity to magic, asserting dominance and signalling someone's immediate demise. The assertion of dominance over one another and performing masculinity is a central theme in the sagas of Icelanders, with clothing used in support of this end. In *Eyrbyggja saga* when Steinthor chooses to take sixty men plus a fancy red tunic to another man's doorstep, this is not arbitrary but a blatant display of power. The same applies to Thord and his navy cape in *Bjarnar saga* as well as demeaning nicknames that function as a way of reminding people of their place in the hierarchy.

There are also times when masculinity is intentionally tampered with in instances of lying in dress. In *Eyrbyggja saga* Snorri Godi temporarily disguises his reputation by appearing in lowly clothing in order to gain the upper hand in the sharing of an inheritance, while in *Víglundar saga* Olof is forced to bluff using clothing and conduct to preserve her husband's reputation and her own bodily autonomy. Conversely, the reputation of King Olaf Tryggvason does not suffer because of his prophetic procurement of provisions for Gest's journey in *Bárðar saga*, probably because he is considered far above this scale.

A similar double standard can be observed in the attitudes towards elaborate clothing. Björn and Thorleif Kimbi in *Eyrbyggja saga* and the merchants in *Víglundar saga* are welcome to dress in high fashion, while Thorgrim the Elegant is given a derogatory nickname due to him being born out of wedlock. The hierarchical social structure is reflected more generally in textile-related names as these seem to be awarded mainly to people on the lower rungs of the ladder, such as the enslaved woman Skinbreeches or the racist depiction of a Sami man, Thorkel Skin-swathed in *Bárðar saga*.

Women hold less power than men in patriarchal societies and at least in the saga narratives, textiles seem to be a way for women to gain some agency. An example of this is Thorgerd in *Eyrbyggja saga*, who has excavated her husband's head and carries it under her cloak to elicit enough of a response from the men in the community to do something about his killing. Katla and Hildigunn in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Bárðar saga* respectively use their knowledge of magic and freshly made garments in order to protect their sons from harm because they are left to their own devices.

Textile production was a female domain and this is reflected in the sagas. However, the scenes involving textile production are simply used as a backdrop for things with a higher priority, i.e. men testosterone. Women were also the ones who made possible the accumulation of wealth by Arnbjorn in *Eyrbyggja saga*, although their lengthy endeavour of textile production is so mundane and habitual to both the narrator and audience that it is rendered invisible.

Clothing and textiles as sites of communication are products of the society in which they are used and hence, as this article has demonstrated, textile imagery is not an independent embellishment in the sagas of Snæfellsnes but rather an integral feature. Textiles' proximity to certain themes and topics warrants more research with a larger selection of source texts and has the potential to further our understanding of the sagas and the context in which they were created.

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