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Saga Writing, Folklore, and Labour: The Death of Svanr in *Njáls saga*

Introduction

This article presents a new contextualisation of the death of Svanr of Svanshóll in *Njáls saga* (ch. 14). According to the saga account, Svanr rowed out to fish, drowned, and after his death was seen entering the coastal mountain of Kaldbakshorn in the Strandir region of the Icelandic Westfjords. In scholarship to date, this passage has found interest mainly as an example of an early Icelandic belief in mountains of the dead (cf. Maurer 1894: 267–268; Ellis 1943: 87–90; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 46–47 [n. 5]; Heizmann 2007; Egeler 2018a: 91–97). Drawing on accounts of fishing practice and folk belief about coastal features in Strandir from the twentieth century, I will approach this saga episode from a completely different – though complimentary rather than contradictory – perspective: the perspective of labour. Considering how the sea was worked – which to a very large extent is dictated by practicalities and the natural environment and therefore until the arrival of modern technologies probably was not prone to fast change – the episode of the death of Svanr seems to be part of a wider pattern of storytelling about coastal features that are important for orientation at sea. Thus, this article adds a new

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Abstract: The article approaches the episode of the death of Svanr of Svanshóll in *Njáls saga* (ch. 14) through the workflow of coastal fishing before the arrival of modern marine technology. It discusses commonalities between the medieval story and its variants in twentieth-century folklore and proposes that they have a common denominator in being narrative plays on techniques of orientation in coastal fishing. This both grounds the episode of *Njáls saga* in processes of everyday labour and, from a methodological point of view, suggests a possible use of folklore for elucidating medieval narratives that can contribute a new angle to the discourse on the relationship between folklore and saga literature.

Keywords: *Njáls saga*, folklore, Iceland, mountains of the dead, maritime mythology, storytelling and everyday labour.

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aspect to the discourse about how modern folklore can be relevant for understanding medieval saga literature (e.g., Sävborg and Bek-Pedersen 2018, 2014; Heide 2013) and highlights the importance of everyday practices of labour for saga composition.

The Death, Travels, and Working Days of Svanr of Svanshóll

Svanr is a character who makes several appearances in saga literature. The medieval recensions of *Landnámabók* mention him as a son of Björn, the eponymous first settler of Bjarnarfjörður in Strandir in the Icelandic Westfjords, where he inhabited the farm of Svanshóll (*Landnámabók* S162, H131; ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1968). He is mentioned once in *Grettis saga* (ch. 12; ed. Guðni Jónsson 1936) and a number of times in *Njáls saga*, which is the medieval text in which he plays the most prominent role. *Njáls saga* describes him as a capable sorcerer but utterly unpleasant character who becomes a good friend and loyal supporter of one of the key troublemakers of the saga (*Njáls saga* chs 10, 12; ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954). *Njáls saga*, which is generally held to have been written in the late thirteenth century (Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007: 281), also contains the earliest account of his death and entrance into an other-world located in a sea cliff (ch. 14):

Pau tíðendi spurðusk ór Bjarnarfirði norðan, at Svanr hafði róit at veiðiskap um várit, ok kom at þeim austanveðr mikit, ok rak þá upp at Veiðilausu ok týndusk þar. En fiskimenn þeir, er váru at Kaldbak, þóttusk sjá Svan ganga inn í fjallit Kaldbakshorn, ok var honum þar vel fagnat; en sumir mæltu því í móti ok kváðu engu gegna, en þat vissu allir, at hann fannsk hvárki lífs né dauðr.

From Bjarnarfjörður from the north these tidings were heard that Svanr had in spring rowed out to fish, and a great easterly gale overtook them and they were thrown ashore at Veiðilausa and perished there. And the fishermen who were at Kaldbakur thought that they saw Svanr go into the mountain Kaldbakshorn, and he was given a warm welcome there; but some spoke against that and said that there was nothing to it. But all knew that he was found neither alive nor dead.

Apart from this passage, Svanr's death by drowning and entrance into a mountain is briefly mentioned in the seventeenth-century recension of *Landnámabók* in Þórðarbók, where it may have been inserted directly

from *Njáls saga* (Jakob Benediktsson 1968: 199 [n. 6]; Simek and Hermann Pálsson 2007: 241).

So far, this little episode of *Njáls saga* mostly seems to have been discussed in the context of analyses of the early Icelandic belief in mountains of the dead (cf. Maurer 1894: 267–268; Ellis 1943: 87–90; Einar Ól. Sveinsson 1954: 46–47 [n. 5]; Heizmann 2007; Egeler 2018a: 91–97). Yet it also is of interest for its intrinsic literary playfulness. *Veðílausa*, where Svanr drowned while trying to fish, is identical with *Veðíleysufjörður*; in local usage today, the two name forms ‘*Veðíleysa*’ and ‘*Veðíleysufjörður*’ are interchangeable (Jón Jónsson, pers. comm.). If one looks at the map (Map 1), *Veðíleysa* actually is quite far removed from Svanshóll; as the crow flies, the two places are some 20 km apart, and much further by sea. So why does *Njáls saga* make Svanr go all the way up to *Veðíleysa* to die? I think the answer lies in the meaning of the place-name: *Veðíleysa* is a typically transparent Icelandic toponym with the meaning “Catchless Sea”, “Sea where no Fish is caught”.¹ For Svanr, trying to fish there indeed ends up being “catchless” – permanently. *Veðíleysa* therefore may have become the place of Svanr’s demise simply because it makes for a good pun, in keeping with a use of toponyms in Icelandic saga narratives that is well-attested also in other texts (cf. Egeler 2018b, 2017).²

Fishing appears to play a role for the story on another level as well. I will approach this aspect of the episode via the modern reception and transformation of the story, from which I will then return to the medieval narrative.

¹ Cf. the term *brimleysa* for a “calm (smooth) sea”: Geir T. Zoega 1910, s.v. ‘brim-lauss’; Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. ‘brim-lauss’.

² Such play with place-names, and the role of place-names in the following discussion, makes the material analysed here relevant also for the wider discourse on Icelandic landscape, toponymy, and the spatiality of saga literature and Icelandic storytelling more generally; cf., for instance, Lethbridge 2020, 2016; Egeler 2019a, 2019b; Valk and Sävborg 2018; Sverrir Jakobsson 2017; Bennett 2014; Mayburd 2014; Barraclough 2012; Hermann 2010; Hoggart 2010; Gunnell 2009, 2008; Wyatt 2004; Brink 2001; Glauser 2000; Overing and Osborn 1994; Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991. This discourse has, with great gain, focused on aspects such as the cultural construction of meaning, ‘cultural memory’, land-taking and the establishment of ownership, the narrative functions of landscapes and toponyms, the transmission of narrative material, or landscape as the physical evidence of saga action. While many of these perspectives could also be applied to the material analysed in this article, the following discussion will focus on an aspect which to date has rarely been touched upon: the connection between landscape storytelling and practices of labour. It should be emphasised that this approach is complimentary to rather than conflicting with research to date. The material discussed in the following could, for instance, also be discussed under the perspectives of the construction of cultural identity or the transmission of saga material.



Map 1: The location of Veiðileysa/Veiðileysufjörður, Kaldbakshorn, Svanshöll, and the two gullies Svansgjá. Based on the maps of the *Uppdráttur Íslands* (1:100 000), Sheet 32: Kúvíkur, reproduced from the digitised edition published by the Icelandic National Library and University Library in Reykjavík (Landsbókasafn Íslands – Háskólabókasafn) with kind permission of the library (Jökull Sævarsson, 3 May 2019). Original of this edition from 1944, first drawn in 1914; addition of the two gullies called Svansgjá by the author.

As already mentioned above in connection with his appearance in *Landnámabók*, Svanr is the eponymous founding hero – or founding anti-hero – of the farm of Svanshóll in Bjarnarfjörður. A farm of this name exists to this day. In 1978, Ingimundur Ingimundarson, who at the time was its owner, wrote a detailed account of the places, place-names, and stories located on its land. This account contains the following note about Svan(u)r and Kaldbakshorn (Ingimundur Ingimundarson 1978: 7):

Framan við Tvíhlíð gengur allmikil hvilft inn í fjallið, en það er hin gamalkunna Svansgjá þar sem fyrsti bóndi á Hóli, Svanur Bjarnarson, er sagður hafa gengið inn í fjallið á leið sinni til sjóróðra í Kaldbaksvík og komið út um samnefnda gjá í Kaldbakshorni. Mér hefði nú þótt trúlegra, að karlinn hefði horfið þarna í skóginn á leið norður yfir fjallið, en nokkrar skógarleifar eru þarna eins og víðar í hlíðinni. Í aðal bratta Svansgjár er steinninn Stakkur, en á hann breiddi Svanur sjóstakk sinn til þurrkunar, en brókargeymslan var í Svansgjá hinni nyrðri, segja munnmæli.

In front of Tvíhlíð a very big grassy hollow runs into the mountain, and that is the long-known Svansgjá (“Svanur’s Gully”), there where the first farmer on [Svans-]Hóll, Svanur Bjarnarson, is said to have entered the mountain on his way to putting to sea in Kaldbaksvík and to have come out in the gully of the same name in Kaldbakshorn. To me it had now seemed more likely that on the way north over the mountain the man had disappeared there in the forest, and there are some remains of forest there, just like also higher up on the slope. In the main part of the escarpment of Svansgjá is the stone Stakkur (“Anorak”), and on it Svanur spread out his sea anorak to dry, and the place to store the trousers was in the northern Svansgjá, says a tradition.

Here, as in the medieval account in *Njáls saga*, Svanur and Kaldbakshorn are connected with each other. Yet the way how they are connected is inverted: whereas in *Njáls saga* the dead Svanur enters Kaldbakshorn, in this modern local tradition the living man exits it. Here, Kaldbakshorn is the endpoint of a magical tunnel that connects two identically-named gullies “Svanur’s Gully”/Svansgjá and thus allows Svanur to travel to the bay of Kaldbaksvík in comparative speed and comfort by going through rather than over or around the mountain (Figs 1, 2; Map 1).

This story is very picturesque and, especially considering the details of the anorak-stone and the matching trousers-stone, seems somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Yet any suspicion that it could be Ingimundur’s own invention is dispelled already by the doubts that Ingimundur himself expressed about its truth, and he also is not the only witness to this tradition. An undated description of the farm of Svanshóll by Matthías Helgason, who was a local collector of historical and legendary lore from

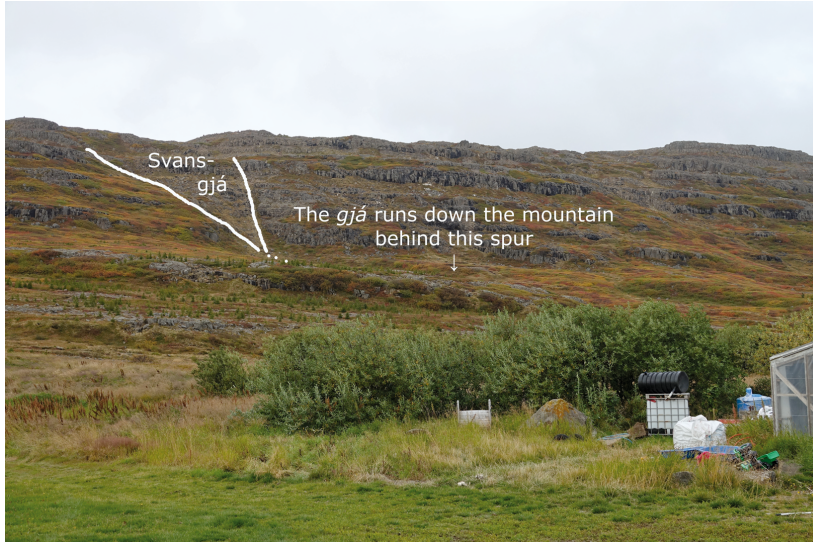


Fig. 1: Svansgjá above the farm Svanshóll. © M. Egeler, 2019, photograph with kind permission of Hallfríður Finnborg Sigurðardóttir.

Strandir and wrote during the first half and middle of the twentieth century, tells it this way (Matthías Helgason, s.a. [a]: 3):

Svansgjá er niður af Tvíhlíð, en framan Urtuholta. Þar, er sagt, að Svanur gamli, sem bærinn er við kenndur, hafi farið inn í fjallið og komið út úr því aftur í Svansgjá í Kaldbakshorni, þegar hann sótti róðra í Kaldbaksvík.

Svansgjá is below Tvíhlíð, but before Urtuholt. There, it is said, that Svanur the Old, after whom the farm is named, had entered the mountain and come out of it again in Svansgjá in Kaldbakshorn, when he rowed out in Kaldbaksvík.

Another testimony stems from Páll Guðjónsson. Páll had been born at the farm of Kaldbakur, directly across the bay of Kaldbaksvík from Kaldbakshorn, in 1891 and lived there for the first 25 years of his life; thus, his testimony reflects the tradition as it was current around the turn of the last century. He tells about the Svansgjá in Kaldbakshorn (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 1975a: 4) (Fig. 2):

Svansgjá er upp af Urðinni upp í brún á Kaldbakshorni, sem er hátt fjall. Sagan segir, að Svanur á Svanshóli í Bjarnarfirði hafi farið milli hennar og Svansgjár í fjallinu upp af bæ hans.



Fig. 2: Kaldbakshorn seen across Kaldbaksvík. Svansgjá is the deep gully running vertically through the centre of the cliff face. © M. Egeler, 2019.

Svansgjá is above Urð up in the brow on Kaldbakshorn, which is a high mountain. The story tells that Svanur at Svanshóll in Bjarnarfjörður was said to have travelled between it and Svansgjá in the mountain above his farm.

The reason why Svanur rowed out from Kaldbakshorn is made explicit by a description of the farm Kleifar in Kaldbaksvík by Matthías Helgason (s.a. [b]: 1):

[...] Svansgjá. Þar kom Svanur gamli á Svanshóli út úr fjallinu, þegar hann stytta sér leið með því að stinga sér inn í fjallið upp af bænum á Svanshóli. Þá stundaði hann fiskiróðra í Kaldbaksvík.

[...] Svansgjá. There Svanur the Old at Svanshóll came out of the mountain, when he shortened the way for himself by thrusting himself into the mountain above the farm at Svanshóll. Then he practised fishing in Kaldbaksvík.

So the point of the magic tunnel of twentieth-century folklore was access to the fishing grounds off Kaldbakshorn. This brings us back full circle to what Svanur was doing in *Njáls saga*, where he died on a fishing expedition and his entrance into Kaldbakshorn was seen by fishermen. Fishing seems to be a core element connecting the modern and the medieval versions of the story of Svan(u)r and Kaldbakshorn.

This focus of the story on both fishing and the mountain Kaldbakshorn leads us to the question: what connects fishing and Kaldbakshorn? Because there is a close connection between the two that goes far beyond the storytelling tradition about Svanur of Svanshóll.

Before the arrival of satellite navigation, navigation in the coastal fisheries relied on sightlines. Locations at sea were defined by alignments: ‘when this hill aligns with that mountain and this stone is in front of that gorge, you are there’. Fishermen working the local waters therefore had a keen awareness of useful landscape features that reliably helped them to reach sea areas known to be good fishing grounds. Such so-called *fiskimið* were stable and well-defined, and much of this traditional local fishing knowledge was collected in the second half of the twentieth century, when its imminent disappearance became foreseeable. Material of this kind was published in venues such as local newsletters and regional journals that were interested in preserving items of local cultural heritage. What is noteworthy about such *fiskimið* in the present context is that Kaldbakshorn, and specifically Svansgjá, was a major point of reference to define particularly good fishing grounds. In 1972, Jóhannes Jónsson mentions the following in a collection of regional *fiskimið* (Jóhannes Jónsson 1972: 94):

Það þykir til dæmis ágætt að leggja línu upp á grunnið þar til Kolbeinsvíkurspeni er genginn fram í skriður fram yfir Svansgjá í Kaldbakshorni.

That for instance is considered excellent, to deploy the line in the fishing ground until Kolbeinsvíkurspeni has moved forwards into the scree fields over Svansgjá in Kaldbakshorn.

And (Jóhannes Jónsson 1972: 94–95):

Þar er bezta fiskislóðin þegar Speninn í Kolbeinsvík er genginn fram í Svansgjá í Kaldbakshorni [...].

There are the best fishing grounds, when Speni in Kolbeinsvík has moved forwards into Svansgjá [...].

A protocol of an interview with Páll Guðjónsson, who has already been quoted above, mentions the name of a (probably the same) *fiskimið* as *Speninn í Gjána*, which again refers to a sightline over the hill Speni to Svansgjá in Kaldbakshorn (Guðrún Magnúsdóttir 1975b: 2). In an issue of the newsletter of the association of the inhabitants of Árneshreppur, this *fiskimið* is listed as (Haukur Jóhannesson 1989: 3):

Speninn í Gjá. Spenann ber í Svansgjá í Horninu.

Speninn í Gjá. It carries Speni into Svansgjá in [Kaldbaks-]Horn.

So an alignment between the hill Speni and Svansgjá was a widely-known definitional feature of an important fishing ground. Furthermore, an undated protocol of an interview that Haukur Jóhannesson held with Gunnar Guðjónsson mentions several *fiskimið* which make reference to Kaldbakshorn and its gully (Haukur Jóhannesson s.a. [a]: 2).

The implication of this material seems to be that Kaldbakshorn and Svansgjá were important for storytelling because they were important for real life, and the contents of the story told about them were closely interlinked with the real-life significance of the place. In the twentieth-century version of the story, this interlink is particularly blatant: the place which in the story is used by a sorcerer to access rich fishing grounds in real life is used to access rich fishing grounds. But the medieval version of the tale in *Njáls saga* also has a double connection with fishing: Svanr dies on a fishing expedition and is seen entering the mountain by fishermen who are out at sea, fishing. The use of Svansgjá in a sightline used to find a particularly rich fishing ground might even suggest why the fishermen of *Njáls saga* were looking towards Kaldbakshorn: did they spot Svanr enter the mountain while they were trying to get their bearings in a similar way as it was still done in the early twentieth century?

Fishing grounds do not change particularly fast. Their location has a marked *longue durée*, as it – at least where there is no overfishing – depends on environmental rather than human factors (cf. Kenchington 1996; Begossi 2006). Nevertheless, we certainly cannot assume direct continuity of the location of fishing grounds between the late thirteenth century and the early twentieth century (which is the period reflected by most of the testimonies collected above). Between the Middle Ages and the early twentieth century, factors like sea temperature and therefore also fish migration patterns showed a considerable fluctuation (see Ragnar Edvardsson et al. 2019 on the example of cod). The exact location of fishing grounds is not at issue here, however. Kaldbakshorn with its 508 m high perpendicular sea cliff is by far the most prominent landscape feature on this stretch of coastline, and the gully Svansgjá is a very marked feature within its cliff face. This makes it a natural reference point for orientation, even if what one wants to get oriented towards changes over time. Its brutalist dominance of the shoreline will not have significantly changed over the last centuries, which is the central reason for the *longue durée* of the role of this mountain in storytelling. Given that the stories discussed here suggest that observation of this mountain from the sea

also is part of this *longue durée*, it is very tempting indeed to wonder whether this is due to its continued use as a reference point to locate fishing grounds before the arrival of modern navigation technology. If so, then in the case of the story of the death of Svanr in *Njáls saga*, fishing techniques attested from just before the arrival of modern navigation technology might be able to throw an unexpected spotlight on the medieval saga episode, highlighting a close interconnectedness of storytelling and practices of working the land and the sea.

There is evidence that such a connection between work and storytelling constitutes a recurring pattern. Thus, Daniel Sävborg (2014: 81–82) has highlighted an episode in *Bárðar saga* (ch. 8; ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1991). In this episode, a fisherman meets a troll-woman who points him towards particularly rich fishing grounds and recites a stanza that lists the landmarks necessary to locate them. Just as in the stories about Svanr, here a story of the supernatural is connected with fishing and landmarks used to locate fishing grounds. Furthermore, in the case highlighted by Sävborg, a marked *longue durée* may also be at play, for Sävborg notes that the same type of story – a supernatural being meets a fisherman and points him towards rich fishing grounds by reciting a stanza that lists the essential landmarks – is also found in a large number of variants in Norwegian folklore. He interprets this recurrence as indicative of the survival of an old tradition common to Iceland and Norway (Sävborg 2014: 82; cf. also Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1991: LXXIV–LXXV with an attestation of the same type of story from the Faeroe Islands). But one does not even have to move that far away from Kaldbakshorn to find parallels for a connection between work and storytelling. Staying both in Strandir and with the example of orientation at sea, one could quote a description of the farm of Krossnes in Árneshreppur from the 1970s. This farm is located two fjords north of Veðileysa, where Svanr was said to have drowned, and there as well, a place with a supernatural story was used to find good fishing grounds (Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 1979: 5):

[...], skammt frá bæ, eru klettur, sem heita Kvíaklettur, huldufólksbyggð. [...] Upp af Egilsgjótu er gat í gegnum Kvíaklettana, Kvíaklettagat. Það var áður haft fyrir fiskimið.

[...], not far from the farmhouse, are rocks, which are called Kvíaklettur, an abode of the Hidden People. [...] Above Egilsgjóta is a hole through the Kvíaklettur rocks, Kvíaklettagat (“Hole of the Kvíaklettur”). In earlier times that was used as an orientation point for fishing (*fiskimið*).

Other testimonies explain that Kvíaklettagat (“Hole of the Kvíaklettar”) was formed by two rocks leaning against each other, that the Kvíaklettar were a church of the Hidden People, and that Egilsgjóta, above which Kvíaklettagat was located, was a hollow which once was used as a hiding place by a man who later was burned for sorcery (Haukur Jóhannesson s.a. [c]: 6; Jóhann Hjaltason s.a.: 3; Guðrún S. Magnúsdóttir 1979: 4; Haukur Jóhannesson s.a. [b]: 8). Thus, being located in elf-inhabited rocks above a place associated with a luckless sorcerer, Kvíaklettagat, just like Svansgjá, is a marine orientation point closely connected with stories about the supernatural. The view from the sea might also have been important for the location of the elf-inhabited cliff in the mountain above Hólmavík in Steingrímsfjörður. According to local tradition, a small pond in the rocky crags above the town is the “Lake of the Elves”, Álfatjörn, and the cliff immediately next to it is the dwelling place of the elves that this lake belongs to (Óli E. Björnsson 1978: 1; Óli E. Björnsson 1990: 37–38). If one visits this cliff on the mountain, it does not particularly stand out from the many other cliffs that form part of the craggy peak above the town; but if seen from the sea, this cliff – and none other – stands out markedly as a deep notch in the mountain’s ridgeline.

It is the special places that have stories told about them – and maybe in research to date, we have underrated the extent to which everyday practices of labour are a central element of what makes places special. To date, landscape, space, and place have tended to be discussed under perspectives such as power relations, cultural memory, and the social construction of meaning and identity.³ These perspectives have proven highly fruitful and have fundamentally deepened our understanding of the Icelandic culture of storytelling. At the same time, an observation which Christopher Tilley and Wayne Bennett made more than fifteen years ago is still valid, when they noted how strikingly disembodied landscape becomes in its treatment in much of the academic literature; in their assessment of the scholarly discourse, what was lacking was the consideration of the bodily experience of landscape (Tilley and Bennett 2004: 27). An important part of the bodily experience that Tilley and Bennett highlighted as largely absent is the experience of everyday physical work: the experience of labour. While certainty cannot be achieved, the striking correlation between the account of the death of Svanr in *Njáls saga*, twentieth-century folklore about his use of the mountain Kaldbakshorn to access his fishing grounds, and the historic use of Kaldbakshorn and

³ Cf. the survey by Sverrir Jakobsson 2017 and the literature cited above in n. 2.

Svangsjá for locating local fishing grounds is still highly suggestive. What this correlation suggests is a context for the story told in this episode of *Njáls saga*: it seems to be a literary play on what was important in everyday working life.

Conclusions

If the thoughts presented here come close to the truth, this has consequences both for our understanding of the saga episode and in a wider methodological perspective. The former, our understanding of the saga, profits from being grounded in the everyday life of the people among whom the story originated. From a strange anecdote about a vision of the supernatural, the story is transformed into a narrative that actually has a *Sitz im Leben* in the everyday work of the people about whom it is told.

In a methodological perspective, furthermore, it adds an aspect to the discourse about the use of modern folklore for understanding medieval sagas that, as far as I am aware, has not yet played a major role in the discussion to date. So far, the question of the use of folklore and folkloristics for understanding medieval literature has, with great success, focused on aspects such as the use of critical terms and categories from folkloristics for analysing sagas (Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir 2014) or continuities between specific narratives in medieval and modern storytelling (Heide 2013; Sävborg 2014; Cormack 2018; cf. Mitchell 2014). Adding to such possible uses of folklore for elucidating medieval literature, the case of the death of Svanr suggests that in some instances folklore from before the complete mechanisation of agriculture can also help to think about possible contexts of stories in the everyday life of people – and everyday life means working life. Literature is not just an intellectual exercise, but also closely connected to the everyday concerns of its day, and those include the perspective of labour. I hope that the present note has shown the potential of reading a story written about farmers and fishermen from the perspective not of the *litteratus*, but that of farmers and fishermen.

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