

RACE AND ETHNICITY AMONG  
MEDIEVAL NORWEGIANS AND ICELANDERS<sup>1</sup>

Jenny Jochens

In chapter 4 of the *Germania* Tacitus states his well-known opinion:

For myself I accept the view that the peoples of Germany have never been tainted by intermarriage with other peoples, and stand out as a nation peculiar, pure and unique of its kind. Hence, the physical type, if one may generalize at all about so vast a population, is everywhere the same—wild, blue eyes, reddish hair and huge frames that excel only in violent effort.

Although Tacitus did not mention skin color, it can be assumed that a light complexion accompanied the three other physical features that characterized the Northern tribes. Writing around the year 100 CE, he did not witness the profound changes in physical appearance that occurred several centuries later among both Romans and Germans, as some of the latter migrated into the Empire created by the former, mingling with people of darker complexion, hair, and eyes than themselves. Nonetheless, Tacitus' description undoubtedly remained valid for centuries concerning the descendants of those Germanic tribes who—although moving as widely as the former group—remained outside the confines of the Empire.

BLACK AND WHITE IN NORWAY

Eventually, however, the peoples of Northern Europe also came to display a greater variety of physical hues, caused probably—as among their cousins in the south—by genetic changes due to migratory movements. Diversity is apparent from an episode in the short story *Geirmundar þáttir* which introduces *Sturlunga saga*. The *þáttir* includes a vignette of the mythical origin of Geirmundur and Hámundur, twin sons of a Norwegian king, which interprets their strange nickname *heljaraskinn* (black as hell). During King Hjorr's absence the queen gave birth to twins who were thus described: "They were both of incredibly large size and had terribly ugly features. But the worst aspect of their ugliness was that nobody thought they had seen darker skin (*dekkra skinn*) than on those two boys." When a slave woman gave simultaneous birth to "a marvelously beautiful (*undarliga fagr*) boy," the queen decided to swap her twins for the slave baby. Things remained this way for three years until a court poet guessed the truth from the difference in behavior between the twins and the other boy. Confessing her deceit, the queen presented the twins to the king as his sons. Observing them, he admitted that he could tell they were his offspring, "although I have never seen such complexion—black as Hel (*heljaraskinn*) as on these boys." Since neither paternity nor maternity were questioned in this case, dark complexion was occasionally found among ancient Norwegians, but it did not conform to the accepted form of beauty.

How did dark features come to appear among the blond Nordic people? *Geirmundar þáttir* exists in three versions. The one just examined credits them to native roots whereas another suggests outside influence through a foreign mother. I shall consider these options in sequence. A few Norwegian men did earn the nickname "the Black" derived from their looks without apparent genetic input from foreigners. This is the case with King Hálfðan Guðrøðarson. Growing up at the court of his maternal grandfather, he "quickly became large and strong and had black hair and for that reason he was called Hálfðan *svarti* (the Black)," as Snorri relates. Likewise, Gísli Súrsson is described as "a dark man" (*maðr svartir*) during his youth in Norway in the long saga bearing his name. More frequently, however, anthropomorphic and native but hardly human beings—a giant (*jötna* or *risi*) or a troll (*troll* or *þurs*)—were themselves associated with blackness or were responsible for offspring with dark features. Thus, the Norwegian woman Hildir was the daughter of Þráinn *svartþurs* (the black troll).

The most famous case of a white-black/blond-dark dichotomy within a native Norwegian/Icelandic family concerns the *Mýramenn* to which Egill Skallagrímsson belonged. Summarizing the qualities of this clan in the last chapter of *Egils saga*, the author indicates that its most remarkable feature was the inclusion of both "the most beautiful" and "the ugliest" of people (*fríðastir* and *ljótustir*). The author enumerates and describes the

<sup>1</sup> My essay has benefitted from a critical reading by Gísli Sigurðsson. A longer version with references, footnotes, and bibliography is being published in *Race and Ethnicity in Medieval Europe*, ed. Ruth Mazo Karras, to appear in 1997 or 1998.

former, but does not provide details about the latter. It is nonetheless clear, that Skalla-Grímr himself belonged among them as well as his more famous son Egill, both described earlier as black and ugly. For purposes of my present thesis, however, the most interesting detail is that Þórolf and Grímr's grandmother Hallbera was the daughter of Úlfr *óargi* (from *óargr*, a nickname that included emphasis on his masculinity perhaps in an ironic and exaggerated fashion). Úlfr's son and thus Hallbera's brother was a man by the name of Hallbjörn hálftröll, his nickname suggesting a giant connection. It was undoubtedly his genes that caused Kveld-Úlfr, Hallbera's son, to be in the throes of magical and frightening powers at night and explained the ugly looks of one of her grandsons. In brief, it appears that dark features were considered so extraordinary in the North that although humans occasionally possessed them, they were better credited to supernatural figures. Both groups were nonetheless considered to be Norwegian.

The version of *Geirmundar þáttr* found *Landnámabók* claims that the mother of the dark twins was a Finnish woman by the name Ljúfvina. Derived from the Anglo-Saxon Leofwine, the name does not fit a Finnish context. By the time these events were supposed to have taken place in Norway, however, the blond Anglo-Saxons had been sharing their genes in Britain with the Celtic peoples for centuries, whereas Scandinavian Vikings started to attack England only recently. Despite an Anglo-Saxon name, a woman brought to Norway from the British isles could have born Celtic genes. Whether or not Ljúfvina/Leofwine should be considered a real person, she may be seen as emblematic of a "traffic in women" from the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon world to Scandinavia that undoubtedly occurred during the Viking age, although the larger movement went in the opposite direction and involved men in greater numbers than women. Norway as well as the British isles therefore experienced genetic mixing of Germanic and Celtic peoples, but since the Celtic element in Scandinavia was never large and the Nordic features brought to the British isles by the Vikings hardly differed from those of the Anglo-Saxons, the physical changes were not striking in either place. A great mixing of genes in the North, however, took place in Iceland. Colonized by Germanic peoples coming from different parts of Norway and a few from the other Scandinavian countries, as well as by Celts and Anglo-Saxons from England, Ireland, Scotland, and the smaller islands in the North Atlantic, empty Iceland became a veritable melting pot, as blond Nordic colonists received heavy doses from numerous settlers originating in the Celtic world. Among the latter were undoubtedly individuals of unmixed stock, but more numerous were those who themselves were already of Nordic-Celtic blending, because the first Vikings--accompanied by only few women--had bred with and married unnamed Celtic females. The medieval Icelanders were themselves the product of this complicated and long-lasting process.

Were the Celts dark? Tacitus had included the Anglii among the Germanic tribes, but he knew little of the Celts. According to Roman and Greek historians and medieval Irish authors' self-perception, Celts and Gauls were "tall of body, with rippling muscles, and white of skin, and their hair blond," in the words of Diodorus Siculus. Nature, however, apparently needed a little help, since the same author adds that they bleached their hair by washing it in lime water. More reflective of Celtic appearance may therefore be names of population groups that incorporate elements such as *-dub-* and *-ciar-* which both denote black. We may never be certain about the looks of Celtic people, and it is unlikely that archaeology *cum* biology will be able to supply definite answers to the question of their coloring. What looked like white skin to a Greek author, moreover, may have seemed dark to a Nordic observer. Of more importance, therefore, than these descriptions is the fact--abundantly illustrated in Old Norse sources--that Nordic people considered the Celts to be dark and thought of themselves by contrast to be fair.

When the Vikings began to meet Celtic people on their overseas explorations, the nickname "the White" started to appear frequently among them. Although the epithet was also found among Norwegians who stayed at home, it was particularly common among those Icelandic colonists whose origins were clearly Norwegian. Leaving their native land, they shared Iceland with numerous Celtic people whose physical make-ups they considered different from their own. It is unlikely that the epithet "the White" was bestowed by the Celts; it is therefore better used as a spectrometer of Norwegian self-consciousness than of Celtic looks. A few examples will suffice; Óleifr *hvíti*, a man in the lineage of the Yngling monarchs of Sweden and Norway, ended his life as king of Dublin and his grandchildren settled in Iceland. Counting several Norwegian kings among his ancestors, Boðvarr *hvíti* became an Icelandic colonist. Also of royal lineage was the Icelandic *landnámshöfðingi* Þórðr Víkingsson whose son Þorvaldr was called *hvíti* and who in turn had a son named Þórðr

hvíti. That blond features were inherited is suggested by another father-son pair, Ólvir and Þorsteinn both named hvíti; the son went to Iceland where, moreover, he married Ingibjörg, daughter of the landnámsmaðr Hröðgeirr hvíti.

## SETTLERS IN ICELAND

### With Celtic Names

Despite these references to blond settlers, Geirmundr and Hámundr heljarskinn were not the only colonists whose dark complexion, hair, and eyes might have earned them the opposite epithet, black, *svart*. Icelandic authors ascribed dark features to full-blooded Celtic settlers and immigrants of mixed Celtic-Norse parentage. These groups are my concern in what follows, but it must be pointed out that it is difficult to make a clear distinction among them. Those who retained their Celtic names clearly belong to a first group. An intermediary cluster were given Norse-sounding, but made-up names, which originally were applied only to people of Celtic origin but later spread to others, whereas a third set includes individuals who adopted regular Norse names but often remained recognizable by a lack of patronymics or by nicknames.

Celts may be found in Iceland from the beginning, but it is difficult to evaluate the number of Celtic settlers among the original Icelandic population. Estimates range from 14% to more than 40%. Furthermore, the influence of Celtic, specifically Irish, culture in Iceland is a hotly debated issue. The difficulty stems from the fact that the first Celtic settlers left few traces. They quickly learned the Norse language, and few Celtic loan words survive in Old Norse and Modern Icelandic. It might be assumed that Irish settlers kept their names and that their numbers could be assessed by a study of personal names among the original settlers found in *Landnámabók*. In fact, however, Irish names seem to have become more fashionable in subsequent generations; no Njáll and Kormákr, Irish names well-known from the sagas of Icelanders, are found among the settlers, who—with few exceptions—adopted Norse names. The exceptions can be found in all social classes. It is perhaps not surprising that those who kept their names belonged to the highest levels of Celtic society either through birth or marriage and had come to Iceland of their own volition. In this group are the two brothers Vilbaldr Dofnaksson and Áskell hnoekkan Dofnaksson, great-grandsons of the Irish king Kjarvalr. Marrying Gréiðö, the daughter of the Irish earl Bjartmarr and settling in Iceland, the Norwegian Ánn named their son after his maternal grandfather. In a similar case Björn Ketilsson who had married a prominent Irish woman by the name of Gjaflaug, named their son after her father Kjallakr; both father and son were among the most important landnámsmenn.

While these men kept their original names, others assumed or were given proper names in the Norse language vaguely based on their origin, as in the case of Vestmaðr (two individuals) or Vestmarr whose names suggest they came from the West. Other settlers assumed regular Norse names to which they (or others) affixed their place of origin as an identifier. Sæmundr *enn suðreyski* and Bárðr *suðreyingr* revealed their origins from the Shetlands in their nicknames. Also thus identified was Eyvindr *enn eyverski*, a man known only from his two daughters, who came from the Orkneys. At times the place of origin did not become part of a man's name but was mentioned in the narrative, as in the stories about "a man named Kalman from a Shetland family" or the one that starts: "Svartkell (with the significant element of *svart* or black) was the name of a man from the Orkneys."

Since one of the stated purposes of *Landnámabók* was to dispel the notion held by people in other countries that "we descend from slaves and criminals," it is clear that slaves and freedmen, in particular those of Celtic origin, would be overlooked by the compilers and writers of the text. A few Celtic slaves are nonetheless identifiable through their names. Little doubt can exist about the origins of Drafdittir, Dufan, Dufþakr, Flóki, Kjaran, Kóri, and Vífill. If the slave's family was sufficiently prominent, he might be allowed his patronymic, as in the cases of Steinröðr Melpatreksson and Erpr Meldússon, the latter the son of a Scottish earl and an Irish princess.

### With Made-Up Norse Names

Ketil *gufa* (smoke) Ørlygsson was the name of a settler with Norwegian parents. He had spent considerable time as a Viking in the western islands and came to Iceland late in the period of settlement. He brought with him six slaves from Ireland, of whom four had

Celtic names. One was called by the Norse Þormóðr and the last was named Svartr.<sup>2</sup> This is the only occurrence of this name in *Landnámabók*, but in the sagas of Icelanders Svartr was used exclusively about slaves or freedmen, suggesting their Celtic origin. Svartr, of course, was not the given name of these people, but by focusing on the perceived characteristic features of darkness—hair, eyes, eyebrows, skin—it gave a fresh identity to men forced to continue life as slaves in new surroundings. Svartr became a personal name given to Celtic slaves acquired by Norwegian settlers on their stopovers on the islands in the North Atlantic and brought to Iceland. In contrast to hvíti which remained a nickname attached to immigrants from Norway belonging to the elite settlers, Svartr became a personal name because it identified in the Norse language and by his appearance any Celtic man who had been robbed of his possessions, including his name, and had been brought to the new land by his masters. In the context of the Icelandic settlement hvíti and Svartr not only identified contrasts in hues of skin, but also of social status.

It is possible that Svartr was not as common a name for slaves in the period of colonization as later suggested by the sagas of Icelanders, but its frequent use implies that authors assumed that Celtic slaves had been numerous among their forefathers and that Svartr was their suitable name. Six sagas include slaves named Svartr. Its general acceptance as a slave name is particularly clear in *Reykdale saga* where a certain Svartr is ordered to keep watch during the night. Since he has received no previous introduction, only the context makes the reader—already accustomed to the other cases—understand that he is the household slave. In other narratives a Svartr had advanced to the task of shepherding or assumed other low-level work.

It is most likely that the name Kolr—from *kol*, coal—carries the same connotations. In one saga a certain Kolr is the manager of ten slaves. In *Njáls saga* the clever juxtaposition of Svartr, a worker (*húskarl*) at Bergþórshváll, and Kolr, the manager (*verktjóri*) of Hallgerðr—the two instruments of Bergþóra's and Hallgerðr's revenge respectively—may reflect literary artistry more than historical fact, but the names indicate that medieval Icelanders still linked dark features with lower-class people and violent acts. In addition to these names which suggest dark features in general, Svarthöfði and Kolskeggr may focus on specific features by which Celtic immigrants were identified. Slaves were certainly far more numerous than those included in *Landnámabók*, but in the following I shall focus on the free settlers who bore these characteristic names and either took or bought land, thus becoming independent Icelandic farmers.

With greater eloquence than the spare prose of *Landnámabók*, the sagas of Icelanders articulate more clearly the perceived connection between dark features and Celtic origins as well as the general aversion to such looks. Examples are numerous. The geographic origin of *svart* is clearly enunciated by the author of *Njáls saga* when he refers to Kolbeinn svarti as "a man from the Orkneys." Likewise, the author of *Vatnsdæla saga* knew of a "Svartr, ... a man who originated in the Shetlands, who was large and strong, unfriendly and very unpopular." When *Vápnfirðinga saga* states that "a man named Svartr arrived here (*hingað*)" and proceeds to describe him in the most unpleasant terms, the author is expressing his conviction that he came from the Celtic world.

The equation between dark features and ugliness is articulated by the maid in *Kormáks saga* who declares that the eponymous hero is *svartur ok ljótr*. Kormákr is said to look like his mother Dalla who was the granddaughter of a Celtic settler Áni (or An). Repeating the bias and stressing family resemblance, *Egils saga* states that Dalla's brother Steinarr was "an ugly (*ljótr*) man."

The two adjectives *svartur* (black) and *ljótr* (ugly) were applied so often to people of Celtic origin that they became their nicknames or proper names. Outside the slave population the nickname svarti was preferred to Svartr. For a long time both versions were reserved for Celtic people and such of their descendants whose physical looks justified the names. Coined by Norse people in their language to identify "the other" with whom they shared their new country, Svartr or svarti taken alone identified with assumed objectivity the dark features of a person belonging to this group, whereas Ljótr revealed the underlying hostility provoked by the unavoidable visibility of "the other". Together the two proper names thus reify the nickname *heljaraskinn* and the sentiment that attached it to King Hjör's two babies.

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Örnólfur Thorsson for a computer search for the words *írskar* (Irish), *ljótur* (ugly), *svartur* (black), and *þrell* (slave) in the *Svartr á Hvítu* editions of the sagas of Icelanders, *Súrunga saga*, *Heimskringla*, *Landnámabók*, and *Grágás*.

*Landnámabók* includes several settlers, both men and women, who were named Ljót or Ljót. Without exception they came from the Celtic lands. Ljót *Órveginn* (the unwashed) took land in Keldunes in the northeast. Although his origin is not specifically stated, his lack of patronymics and his unattractive nickname suggest--as I shall show--that he was a Celt. Hrolleifr and his mother Ljót arrived in the western part of Iceland and sought the help of their relative, Sæmundr suðeyrski, who was the brother of Hrolleifr's father Arnaldr. In their party was also a man named Ljót, Hrolleifr's cousin on his mother's side. In other words, the Celtic woman Ljót came to Iceland with her own son Hrolleifr and her sister's son named Ljót. Another woman also named Ljót came with her two brothers--the group was said to "originate in the western lands"--and she became a landnámsmaðr in her own right.

The name Ljót so clearly identified its bearer with his dark features that it seems almost redundant when the author of *Njálta* attributes the nickname svarti to one of Hallgerðr's relatives by this name, calling him Ljót enn svarti. That the ugliness of a Ljót was normally defined by dark features is suggested by two individuals who bear this name but to which the contrasting feature of "the Pale" (*enn bleiki*) is added as a nickname.

Recording not only the more than four hundred original settlers but also their descendants, *Landnámabók* attributes the names Ljót, Ljót, Svart, and the nickname svarti to individuals in the latter group. With few exceptions these people can be shown to be descendants of Celtic landnámsmenn. Their names indicate not only that the distinctive Celtic features were inherited, but also that they were still being noticed. To make available the entire population from which individuals carrying these names might be generated, it is necessary to identify other clues--in addition to their Celtic and made-up Norse names--by which Celtic immigrants can be identified, before the search for the tall-tale names among their descendants can begin.

#### With Regular Norse Names and Nicknames

I shall return to the evidence from *Landnámabók*. Most Celtic settlers adopted or were given Norse names, but their Celtic origin might still be detected from an additional indication of geographic origin, at times stated explicitly in the text. This is the case with the three siblings, Hildir, Hallgeir, and Ljót who "originated in the west." Likewise, the brothers Ráðormr and Jólgeir came "from the West to Iceland." Ráðormr's foster brother Þorkell bjálfi was undoubtedly also Celtic, a suspicion reinforced by the fact that he married a woman from the Orkneys. As suggested from this case, it seems that during the first generations Celtic immigrants established close ties, including marriage, to bind their minority together. Þormóðr the Old and Ketill, sons of Bresi, came from Ireland to Iceland. Lest readers be confused by the Norse names and their patronymic, the writer added: "They were Irish."

Most Norwegian settlers carried long lists of forefathers in their mental baggage. Another indication of Celtic ancestry is therefore the lack of patronymics or other references to ascending relatives. Among the more than four hundred original settlers one fourth (111) are listed with merely their given name and no patronymics. It would be too rash to assume, however, that all of these people came from the Celtic world. A Hafnar-Ormr and a Hallsteinn, for example, both without patronymics, are stated to have arrived in Iceland from Norway. Still, it is more likely that landnámsmenn and their descendants would boast of Norwegian roots but tend to omit Celtic origins. It is therefore plausible that a large part of the immigrants whose ancestors were not recorded came from the Celtic world. It may thus be safe to assume that the brothers Ísleifr and Ísrøðr and the unrelated Ísólfir were Celts. (In passing we notice that Ísleifr's grandson was named Ljót.) Such names were unknown in Norway and their bearers may have created new identities for themselves with the characteristic Ís- prefix to emphasize their affinity with the new land, Ísland, thereby announcing their determination to make a life for themselves there.

About the same size as this group is another cluster of individuals who also lack paternal identifiers but are equipped with nicknames. Some of these are clearly Celtic, as in the cases of Helgi and Hróaldr bjóla, and Þorgeirr meldín whose nicknames were Celtic loan words. The previous analysis makes it safe to assume that Þorbjörn svarti, a man without patronymics who bought land from the Hafnar-Ormr mentioned above, was a Celt, as was Kolr who "took land." Less lucky in the new country was another Celt, Þórir svarti, who was killed by a Norwegian immigrant.

A special group consists of the handful of settlers who bear the nickname *enn hanrammi* (full of magic) or who are described as being *hanrammr mjök* (very

knowledgeable in magic). The nickname is attached to Vékel and the description characterized Dufþakr and Þorkell *bundinfóti* (with the bandaged leg). Both Norwegians and Celts were credited with magical powers, but although women dominated in this field among the Nordic people, magical abilities may have been more common among men in the latter group. In case of Dufþakr therefore, his Celtic name is matched by his reputation for magic.

As in the case of the completely proper names, not all nicknames can be assigned to the Celtic group. Óláfr *tvennunbrúni* (with double eyebrows) came to Iceland from Norway and Þorsteinn *þjokkubeynn* (fatlegs) was the Norwegian father of two landnámsmenn. These nicknames highlighted unique physical traits, perhaps not of an entirely unpleasant nature. Many, however, call attention to unattractive features, physical or mental, such as Óláfr *belgr* (belly), Gils *skeiðarnef* (a reference to his nose), Þorbjörn *bitra* (the sharp), Eyvindr *auðkilla* (the hump-back), and Ketill *þistill* (thorn), the last described as a "wicked and overbearing man." Like the dark features, these and similar nicknames undoubtedly in many cases identified Celts.

### Women

*Landnámabók* mentions about 90 women by name who accompanied their husbands, brothers or fathers. A few (13) were landnámsmenn in their own right. Although most came from Norway, a few Celtic women were among the first settlers. I refer again to the Celtic female settler named Ljót who came with her two brothers. She took land and lived at Ljótastaðir. Among married women was a certain Hjálp, wife of Ørlygr Hráppsson, a man with Norwegian parents, but fostered in the Shetlands where he married Hjálp. Her modest background is suggested by the biblical simplicity of her Norse name which means help. The couple had a son Valþjófr. Full grown when Ørlygr went to Iceland, the son accompanied his father. In Iceland Ørlygr married Ísgerðr, the daughter of Þormóðr Bresason who was an Irish landnámsmaðr. Their great-grandson was named Ilugi svartí--a man to whom I shall return--who eventually had a daughter called Kolfinna. Suggesting dark features, this name was common in medieval Iceland but unknown in Norway.

A special group of Celtic female settlers consisted of high-ranking women who had been courted or abducted by Vikings. In some cases the men married them and settled in Iceland where these Celtic women produced the first generation of native Icelanders. In other cases the women remained in their home country but their children eventually settled in Iceland. This was the case of Hlíf *hestageldir*, the mistress of the Norwegian Váli the Strong and mother of his three sons. Váli had been outlawed from Norway and had settled in the Shetlands, but the sons went to Iceland as colonists. To the first group belongs Mýrún, daughter of Þjaðmákr, king of Ireland whom Auðun stoti--one of the three sons of Váli the Strong and Hlíf just mentioned--managed to obtain as his wife. The couple had three sons, and in passing it is worth noticing that the youngest was named Svarthöfði, perhaps the result of his half-Celtic father and full Celtic mother. Ann *rauðfeldr* (with the red coat), one of the many Norwegians dissatisfied with the rule of King Haraldr hárfagri, went a Viking in Ireland where he "obtained" (*fekk*) Grétöð, the daughter of an earl named Bjartmar. The couple went to Iceland where they settled and had children, of whom the son was named after Grétöð's father. Vilborg, daughter of King Ósvaldr, was married to Þórðr *skeggi*, brother of Ørlygr Hráppsson mentioned above. The author of *Landnámabók* adds that "many important people in Iceland descended from Þórðr" (and presumably from Vilborg).

Sometimes the women who transmitted Celtic genes were themselves the product of mixed parentage. This is the case with Álfðís *en barreska*. Her grandfather, the Norwegian Ólvir *barnakar!* (child's friend) Einarsson, known as "a great Viking" had traveled widely. Sowing his seeds wherever he went, he had four named children. The reproductive careers of two of these are of interest in this connection. The first, Steinmóðr, had a son with the Celtic name Konáll, whose daughter Álfðís may have been born on the island of Barrey and thus earned her nickname. Nonetheless, she was already in Iceland when she was picked as the bride for Óláfr feilan Þorsteinsson by his grandmother Unnr *djúpuðga* (the Deepminded). In Iceland Álfðís passed her own mixed Celtic-Norse genes directly to subsequent generations. The second was Ólvir's daughter Jörunn whose mother apparently lived on one of the islands known as the Færeyjar (Faroes). It is known that Jörunn later had two sons with the Norwegian Naddoddr who had been one of the first to

discover Iceland but decided to settle in the Færejar instead. Eventually their two sons Brúndólfir and Már went to Iceland.

### Of Mixed Celtic and Norse Origins

Most of the Celtic women mentioned so far, as well nameless but countless slaves, added their numbers to the Celtic men among the colonists. Jórunn and Hlíf have introduced a more numerous group of women who—while remaining abroad—became mediators of Celtic genetic input into the Icelandic population by cohabiting with Viking men and producing children of whom many of the boys eventually settled in Iceland. The number of these settlers with mixed Norse-Celtic inheritance did not rival the figure of Norse immigrants, but it was undoubtedly larger than that of the pure Celts. The names of prominent women responsible for channelling Celtic genes into the Icelandic population were recorded, whereas the far more numerous lower class females who provided sexual services to visiting Vikings remained nameless. Their reproductive efforts in children and grandchildren, nonetheless benefited the new colony.

In the first group of named women were three daughters of King Kjarval who—according to Norse sources—was king of Ireland in the late ninth century. I shall mention only Friðgerðr, married to Þórir *háma* (the thinker), whose daughter Þorgerðr became the wife of Hǫfða-Þórðr Bjarnarson, a prominent Norwegian who settled in Iceland. The couple had nineteen children. Among the seven about whom marital information exists, four obtained spouses with various degrees of Celtic blood. Another Irish king was Mýrkjartan whose daughter Melkorka—of literary fame in *Laxdæla* saga—was bought as a slave in Norway and brought to Iceland by the chieftain Hǫskuldr with whom she had two sons. A less degrading fate befell the Scottish princess Niðbjörg, daughter of King Bjólan, who was abducted by Helgi Óttarsson. He married her later and their children settled in Iceland.

Leaving Norway with only few women, Viking men naturally sought sexual solace in the arms of Celtic girls. These women were rarely mentioned, but their reproductive results can be ascertained by a careful reading of the subsequent history of the Norwegian settlers, and their distinctive genes—producing dark features in their offspring—remained visible through generations and continued to be recalled in nicknames. As an additional identifier it is worth repeating that Celts appear to have sought out fellow Celts for marriage and other liaisons, creating a coherent Celtic subset. A few additional examples will suffice.

It will be recalled that Ketill gufa Ørlygsson had spent considerable time in the West on Viking expeditions. When he finally arrived in Iceland he brought with him six Irish slaves. In Iceland he married Ýrr, incidentally the daughter of the dark Geirmundur heljarskinn, with whom he had two named sons. He also had a daughter—unnamed in the sources—whom he married to Oddgeirr. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the daughter was half-Celtic, especially since her husband in one version of *Landnámabók* is stated to be a *vestmaðr*.

While still in Norway Ketill *flatnefr* (flatnose) Bjarnarson had four legitimate children with his wife Yngvildr. King Harald hárfagri sent him to the West with the mission of recapturing the Shetland islands for the king. Ketill succeeded but stayed on and kept the islands for himself. It is not known whether Yngvildr accompanied him abroad, but Ketill apparently had a liaison with a Celtic woman who produced a daughter named Jórunn with the rare nickname *manvitsbrekka*. Later Jórunn named her own son after her father, but the young man was also given the nickname *inn fíflski* (the fool), perhaps because he was Christian. At any rate, "going from the Shetlands to Iceland," Ketill *inn fíflski* propagated his mother's Celtic genes in new generations of native Icelanders. Among the old Ketill's legitimate children I have already mentioned his oldest son Björn who married a prominent Irish woman and brought her to Iceland. Ketill's second son was Helgi bjóla. His Celtic nickname suggests that he had spent some time in the West, and indeed, it is stated that he "traveled to Iceland from the Shetlands." His wife is not mentioned but he had two sons, one of whom was named Kollsveinn, a name unique to Iceland. As a brief summary of the preceding analysis it can be stated that Celtic blood flows freely as soon as the surface of the rich body of material contained in *Landnámabók* is scratched.

### MEDIEVAL ICELANDERS

The genealogical material found in *Landnámabók* was elaborated in the sagas of Icelanders, as details were added and events dilated into full narratives. It is therefore not

surprising that the sagas contain the names and nicknames of the same individuals as found in the record of the settlers and their descendants. Working with the material in *Landnámabók* I have already acknowledged in passing several descendants of the original Celtic settlers in whom the dark Celtic features reappeared, causing them to be identified by names or nicknames based on the two adjectives *svart* and *ljótr*. In the following I shall therefore concentrate on a few cases in which the fuller narrative of the sagas allowed the authors to expand on the Celtic context, extend the genealogies, or modify the meaning of the names.

The first case concerns the man, Þórarinn svartir Þórólfsson at Mávahlöf, known both from *Landnámabók* and *Eyrbyggja saga*. From the first source it was known that he was the great-grandson of Herjólfur who came to Iceland from Norway in his old age. Herjólfur had a son by the name of Þorsteinn *kolskeggr* whose nickname suggests that the mother was Celtic. Þorsteinn in turn had a son named Þórólfr who married Geirförla, a woman who perhaps also carried Celtic genes, since her father Þórólfr had been on Viking expeditions for a long time. It is not surprising therefore that their son was named Þórarinn svartir. These details are confirmed in the saga which further elaborates the Celtic context by describing Þórarinn as "a big and strong man, ugly (*ljótr*) and taciturn" and by elaborating his continued association with the Celtic world. When a ship arrived full of men from Norway and the Shetlands, the Norwegians went to the house of a certain Steinþórr whereas the Celtic group, including the captain Álfgeirr and a Scotsman by the name of Nagli, received hospitality from Þórarinn. In the end Þórarinn left Iceland and after a brief stint in Norway he went west with Álfgeirr. According to this story then, not only were Celtic traits still visible in appearance and audible in the names of people of mixed ancestry--although these had been rooted in Iceland for generations--but a consciousness of Celtic ethnicity still persisted.

Illugi svartir was another man of mixed ancestry who appears both in *Landnámabók* and in a narrative, in this case *Gunnlaugs saga*. He was the great-grandson of the couple Þrygr and Ísgerðr whom I already have mentioned as carriers of Celtic genes. By marrying Ingibjörg, Illugi increased the Celtic inheritance of his children because her grandfather was the Celt Hǫrðr, brought to Iceland as a slave by the famous Auðr (or Unnr) the Deepminded. It is not surprising therefore, that their daughter was named Kolfinna. Their son Gunnlaugr, of more literary fame than both father and daughter, is mentioned only briefly in *Landnámabók*, but he is the hero of the saga bearing his name. Here he is described as "large and strong, with light-brown hair . . . and black eyes." Of particular interest for the present inquiry is the observation that a certain Þorkell svartir also lived on Illugi svartir's farm. He was stated to be a close relative of Illugi, had grown up there, and was now a worker (*heimamaðr*). It is hard to avoid the suspicion that Þorkell was Illugi's illegitimate son: the nickname *svart* which they held in common betrayed the secret. When Þorkell first appeared in the narrative he had acquired an inheritance, perhaps from his mother, and he asked Gunnlaugr to join him on the journey to retrieve it. Subsequently Þorkell svartir accompanied Gunnlaugr on all his travels, and in the end he gave his life for the man who may have been his half-brother.

Outside the class of slaves Svartir was rarely found as a personal name. As slavery disappeared, so did the name. As a nickname, however, svartir was retained for several centuries even after patronymics became firmly established. Ljótr, the other name that identified Celtic people by their appearance, continued as a regular name but underwent modification. Of the two "pale-faced" (*bleiki*) Ljótr figures encountered earlier in the sagas of Icelanders, one was a berserk and the other a violent viking. Two other narratives contain each a figure called Hólmǫngu-Ljótr. Their looks are not described, but their nickname, referring to the Norse version of dueling, suggests the same violent behavior that characterized their two pale-faced namesakes. Since the family relations of these four men are not given, their ancestors can not be traced back to *Landnámabók*. Their names may suggest that Ljótr had ceased to describe a man with dark features, but a remnant of unease associated formerly with such characteristics can be detected in the implication of anti-social behavior.

A complete reassessment of the name Ljótr, however, is found in two bearers of the name, men who belonged to the most respected and promising of the Icelandic chieftains described in the sagas of Icelanders. One is the noble Valla-Ljótr, a minor figure in *Laxdæla saga*, but one of the chief characters in the saga bearing his name. The other is Ljótr Hallsson, the promising young man who was destined for a great career in the world described in *Njáls saga* but was killed in the flower of youth. Both men could trace their

ancestors back to *Landnámabók*, Ljót Hallsson in greater detail than Valla-Ljótr. The most interesting aspect of their lineage is that in neither case is it possible to detect Celtic traces. Both men, in fact, possessed a clear Norwegian ancestry. Valla-Ljótr's grandfather Álrekr had arrived in Iceland with his brother Hroðgeirr who carried the significant nickname *enn hvíti*. Valla-Ljótr's father was named Ljótólfr and was one of the chief characters in *Svarfjela saga*. Likewise, in Ljót Hallsson's lineage his grandfather Þoðvarr was a landnámsmaðr and he also carried the distinctive nickname *enn hvíti*. Furthermore, beyond Ljótr's father Hallr the family could trace the lineage back through thirteen generations before arriving at a mythical ancestor named Svási. Although he was designated as a giant, he was not associated with the color black. The criteria used to detect the presence of Celtic women are absent in the lives of these men (a fact which of course does not preclude their existence). Based on the available evidence, therefore, it seems that Ljót Ljótólfsson and Ljót Hallsson emanated from pure Norwegian stock and that the name Ljótr therefore did not carry the typical connotations of Celtic origin, such as dark features or ugliness.

In Valla-Ljótr's case, his name may have been inspired by his father's. In the name Ljótólfr Ljótr was combined with the Norse word for wolf, *úlfr*, modified to *-ólfr* as suffix in names. Ljótr and Ljótólfr are recorded from Norway only in the late medieval period, but the names may have been known before. Given the absence of wolves in Iceland, one cannot help but wonder whether the fear that undoubtedly looms behind the disapproval expressed in names like Svartr and Ljótr might not originally have been inspired by primeval feelings such as fear of night and dread of dangerous animals, notions epitomized in Norway in names like Ljótólfr, which immigrants carried from Norway to Iceland and employed in new situations when foreigners, not beasts, conjured up fear. In this connection it is worth noticing that medieval Icelanders often encountered dark, black, and threatening figures in their dreams.

Although the use of Svartr as a personal name disappeared with slavery, seven men bore the name in *Sturlunga saga*. It is extremely rare, however, among the ordinary people whose names appear in charters and documents in the late Middle Ages and beyond. With the establishment of patronymics, svarti was no longer needed as a nickname and it also became rare. On the other hand, Ljótr, the other name affixed in the beginning of the settlement period to people of Celtic origin, shed its connection with physical features and became a regular name both in the context of the sagas of Icelanders and in *Sturlunga saga* where it is carried by five individuals. The use of *-ljótr* in compound names such as Arnljótr and Þorljótr also suggests that the name had lost its original connotation. Like Svartr, Ljótr nonetheless declined in the late medieval period as well. Despite the episodic conservatism of Icelandic naming patterns, both names are virtually non-existent today.

Limitations of space prevent an examination of naming patterns and looks in the microcosmos of the Orkneys as well as among the royal pretenders to the Norwegian throne who—appearing from the Celtic world during the thirteenth century—had been engendered by Norwegian kings on local women.

## REPRODUCTION

As was the case with the name Ljótr among men, the female Ljót was invariably found among women who came to Iceland from the Celtic world or who can be shown to have had Celtic ancestors. In contrast to the descriptions of the men, however, no direct disapproval is expressed about the looks of the women who carry the name. A slight criticism of a woman—but lacking the name—is expressed in the case of Þorbjörg Glúmsdóttir. Describing her in a scene in which her interlocutor is clearly in love with her, the author of *Fóstbreðra saga* nonetheless declared that she was "not particularly pretty." The reason seems to be that she had "black hair and eyebrows, and for that reason she was called Kolbrún (coal brows)." Too little is known about her parents to demonstrate Celtic roots in the family. Regardless of origin, however, very old women seem to be thought of in similar terms. In *Droplaugarsona saga*, for example, Þórdís is described as "old, and both ugly and black." Likewise, imaginary or supernatural women were also perceived as being dark or black. In these cases the dislike of dark features is no longer associated with Celts but has been attached to other people of whom the author does not approve.

It is possible that dark looks in Celtic women were considered less objectionable than the corresponding looks in men. Without providing details, the author of *Njáls saga* declared that Kormloð, the mother of King Sigtrygg from Ireland, was "the most beautiful of women." Even without this declaration of the beauty of one Celtic woman, it is clear

that Norse men had little inhibition in procreating with her sisters. At times racial differences may be so great that they prevent intermingling of people in large numbers, if not in individual cases, but this was not the case in Iceland where, in fact, the medieval population was the result of an initial commingling of blond Norse and dark Celtic colonists in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Greatly pronounced differences nonetheless set limits for Norse experimentation with genetic mixing between peoples. Icelanders did not continue their ancestors' practice on their further voyages north- and eastward. During the Icelandic colonization of Greenland sexual contacts did not occur between the Norse and the native Inuits perhaps simply because of the great distance which separated the two. Including women in numbers sufficient to produce the next generation, the Norse colony--as revealed by archaeology--existed for half a millennium without mingling with the natives. Maintaining existence separate from the Inuits may have been conditioned by the Norse experience in the New World. In Vfnland the Greenlanders encountered the Indians and/or the Inuits immediately. The initial exchanges--mainly of an economic nature--were friendly but quickly turned hostile and persuaded the Norse to return home. Aggravating the situation was the demography of the Norse contingent. More an expedition than a colony, it contained too few women, as the following statement from *Eiríks saga* reveals: "There was deep division between the men on account of the women, for the unmarried men fell foul of the married, which led to serious disturbances." Norse men may not have sought sexual encounters with local women because the Indians of the New World--as the Inuits in Greenland--were of strikingly different physiques. Although the Norse had accommodated the differences in the Celtic people, the alterity of the Inuits and Indians was considered too great. In all likelihood, the sight of the aborigines generated revulsion in the Norse. The term *skrælingjar* which designated the peoples both in Greenland and Vfnland is hardly flattering, since it suggests wizened and dried-up features. In a face-to-face encounter in Vfnland the natives were described as "dark (*svartr*; in a variant version: small) and evil-looking men with rough hair on their heads; they had large eyes and broad cheekbones." In Vfnland sexual frustration and reproductive needs were not enough to overcome the Norse bias.

## CONCLUSION

This later failure to mix with peoples of pronouncedly distinctive physical traits should not obscure the fact that Norse and Celts earlier had overcome the considerable visible and audible differences separating the two peoples. The rapprochement had started on the British isles and was practiced by both sides. Celts taken slaves by Vikings and brought to Iceland had little choice but to accept the conditions enforced upon them, but others came voluntarily. They willingly gave up their identity epitomized by their Celtic names and took on Norse names; at best a part of their old selves was preserved in nicknames that may have seemed unimportant to themselves but were bestowed by their masters or neighbors who in this way identified them in the new world of Iceland. They also abandoned their native language and set about to learn Norse, a language so different from their own that perfection may only have been achieved among the new generations.

On the other side, Norse men arrived in small groups and were eager to enlist a labor force for the colossal work of exacting a living from the empty land and its stubborn resources. They imported Celtic slaves and welcomed free Celts who came on their own, often giving or selling land to them. Favoring their own blond appearance, however, the Norse were unable to hide their discomfort prompted by the dark complexion of the foreign men and expressed it in distinctive names and unflattering nicknames. Since the Norse brought only few women from Norway, female slaves from the Celtic world were valued both for their physical labor and sexual services. In the beginning free Celts tended to associate with each other, and Celtic men may have preferred to marry women of their own kind, but slave women were in no position to refuse their sexuality to Norse masters. Nameless Celtic slaves and named but often single men from Norway initiated the intermingling of the two ethnic groups and produced a significant portion of the first cohort of native Icelanders, some of whom displayed the tell-tale dark characteristics of their mothers. In the following generations men and women married without concern for ethnic origin. The adaptability of the original Celts and the corresponding receptivity of the Norse eliminated racial and ethnic tension and produced in Iceland a culture remarkable for its homogeneity, but forged by a population which was and has remained more varied than elsewhere in the North, at least until the middle of this century.