‘Cast a cold eye on life, on death’: Disease in the Sagas
(Abstract)

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One would think that a society whose mythology contains a blind, a one-eyed and a
one-handed god would also include many tales of sickness in its literature. Judging
from skeletal material, disease and disability were common enough experiences in the
Viking Age, and also in the Saga Age. Indeed, pustules and mystery illnesses are
mentioned in the texts, as well as the occasional chopped-off limb. Nevertheless,
writers of medieval literature are less interested in the pathology of their plagues than
in using disease and healing for didactic purposes.

In my paper I want to examine the function of the diseased in saga literature. I
will particularly look at depictions of characters that have been struck by contagious
diseases. In a number of cases the afflicted develop supernatural powers, in particular
the gift of prophecy, which is either bestowed during life (as with Þorgunna in
Eyþbyggja Saga), or after death (as, for example, to Þorsteinn Eiríksson in
Grænlendinga Saga). The function of such prophecies seems to be to project the
narrative forward, as recently discussed by Charlotte Kaiser.\(^1\) However, the ability to
penetrate both the world of the dead and that of the living puts them close to other
liminal beings, which is more than a plot device. Attitudes towards contagious
diseases, such as leprosy, in medieval Christian traditions often regard the afflicted as
equally cursed and blessed, since the illness is seen as a living purgatory. I want to
examine whether such ideas have influenced the perception of disease in Saga
literature.

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\(^1\) C. Kaiser, *Krankheit und Krankheitsbewältigung in den Isländersagas* (Cologne: