

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

**Christina Lee  
(University of Nottingham)**

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 *Eyrbyggja Saga*), or after death (as, for example, to Þorsteinn Eiríksson in *Grænlandinga Saga*). The function of such prophecies seems to be to project the narrative forward, as recently discussed by Charlotte Kaiser.<sup>1</sup> 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Kaiser, *Krankheit und Krankheitsbewältigung in den Isländersagas* (Cologne: Seltmann & Hein, 1998).