

# Religion in the Viking Age Moral Economy

A reading of a *lausavísa* by Egill Skallagrímsson

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**ABSTRACT:** *On those rare occasions when Old Norse religion and morality are set alongside one another, the notion of a non-Christian morality is typically dismissed or Old Norse religion is viewed as actively holding back moral progress. I seek to challenge that rough consensus by examining lausavísa 19 by Egill Skallagrímsson, a short poem that seems to directly link gods with punishing certain forms of conduct. I approach the text with three research questions in mind: 1) Were the gods perceived as being aware of and concerned with human actions? 2) What types of transgressions do they seem to care about? 3) What is their perceived efficacy? Through this process, I seek to improve the modern understanding of the extent to which Old Norse deities were perceived as sympathetic to particular moralities and responsive to abuses against their followers.*

**RESUME:** *I de sjældne tilfælde, hvor forskere sammenstiller norrøn religion og moral, bliver begrebet om en ikke-kristen moral typisk afvist, eller også anføres det, at norrøn religion aktivt modvirkede moralske fremskridt. Jeg argumenterer imod denne konsensus, idet jeg undersøger lausavísa 19 af Egill Skallagrímsson, et kort digt, som synes direkte at forbinde guder med straf for bestemte typer adfærd. Jeg tilgår teksten på baggrund af tre forskningsspørgsmål: 1) Blev guderne opfattet som værende opmærksomme på og optagede af menneskers handlinger? 2) Hvilke typer overtrædelser forekommer de at være opmærksomme på? 3) Er der en opfattelse af, at guderne handler imod sådanne overtrædelser? Igennem denne analyse søger jeg at forbedre den moderne forståelse af, i hvor høj grad norrøne guder af deres dyrkere blev opfattet som værende sympatisk indstillede overfor bestemte typer moralsk opførsel, og hvorvidt de reagerede på deres dyrkeres overtrædelser.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Egill Skallagrímsson; lausavísa 19; Old Norse religion; morality; skaldic poetry; Eiríkr blóðøx; landáss*

## Introduction

Among the many contributions that Jens Peter Schjødt has made to modern researchers' understanding of the deep-lying complexities of Old Norse mythology and ritual, some of the most imposing concern the worship of the god Óðinn. For this tribute to Professor Schjødt's achievements, I will therefore examine a single stanza of poetry attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson, early Icelandic skald, farmer and one of the most notorious of the adherents of that god. I will investigate this text as a potential intersection between pre-Christian religion and morality in the North.<sup>1</sup>

The stanza in question, *lausavísa* 19 is remarkably information rich considering that it is made up of only eight short lines.<sup>2</sup> Essentially, the *lausavísa* is an appeal to the Old Norse gods to punish the Norwegian king Eiríkr blóðøx for his crimes by driving him off his lands. It is quoted in Egill's eponymous saga in relation to a disagreement between Egill and the royal couple Gunnhildr Gormsdóttir and Eiríkr (*Egils saga*, ch. 57–58). As part of a lengthy feud, Eiríkr and Gunnhildr have thwarted Egill's pursuit of a legal case over his wife Ásgerðr's inheritance at the Norwegian Gulapíng: when the case seemed to be going in Egill's favour, Gunnhildr ordered some of her men to destroy the legal enclosure, ending proceedings and frustrating Egill's pursuit of a legal remedy. There follows a brief but bloody skirmish at sea.

*Lausavísa* 19's petition to divine authorities is striking against the backdrop of previous scholarship: texts that contemplate morality in this culture rarely make a connection with religion and the reverse is true of almost all of the many articles and handbooks on Old Norse religion (e.g. Brink and Price 2008; Pulsiano, et al. 1993; Simek 1993). A few scholars specifically dismiss the notion of a pre-Christian morality: Sigurður Nordal, for example, sees Old Norse religion as actually holding back progress in morality (1990, originally published in Icelandic in 1942 as *Íslensk menning*; similarly, de Vries 1970; Gehl 1937; Gordon 1957, xxxiii; Hermann Pálsson 1971). A recent exception is a chapter by John Lindow in the *Pre-Christian Religions of the North* handbook series, which takes as a starting point that, in Old Norse society, "notions of ethics were always imbued with the religious" (2020, 479) and thereafter presents a sensible overview of Old Norse ethics, though largely setting aside questions such as whether the gods were believed to punish human transgressions. The rough consensus about Old Norse religion's disconnection from morality is worth questioning not only in light of Lindow's study and Egill's poetry but also of advances in other fields of study, such as anthropology, cognitive science of religion and evolutionary psychology, which propose that beliefs in moral gods correlate with an increase in

<sup>1</sup> The term *religion* has been considered controversial in recent years but will be employed here in the sense of a grouping of customs, texts and principles that turn toward the supernatural or transcendental. For sensible discussions of the usefulness of these kinds of etic constructions to Old Norse studies, see Lindberg 2009 and Nordberg 2012.

<sup>2</sup> My text for Egill's *lausavísur*, and for *Arinbjarnarkviða*, follows Finnur Jónsson's *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning. B: Rettet tekst*, whereas *Höfuðlausn*, *Sonatorrek* and the prose of *Egils saga* are from the edition of that saga by Bjarni Einarsson. Translations are my own.

social complexity, like that undergone by Scandinavia in the Iron Age and early medieval period.<sup>3</sup>

Some of these theories have already been tested against Old Norse evidence by Ben Raffield, Neil Price and Mark Collard (2019; cf. Taggart 2019; Taggart 2021), who survey the Old Norse materials to apply themselves to two queries that are very lightly addressed in Lindow's work: did early Scandinavians perceive themselves to be subject to monitoring and punishment by the Old Norse gods? In the assessment of Raffield, Price and Collard, they did but only in a limited range of circumstances, in particular related to oath-taking (2019, 13–14). However, despite Raffield, Price and Collard's valuable contribution, a great deal of potential remains for further elucidating the intersections of pre-Christian morality and religion. One approach would involve applying the still progressing theoretical work in the disciplines named above. The other would inspect early Icelandic and Scandinavian texts and material culture that have not been considered in previous research to complement studies like those by Lindow and Raffield, Price and Collard, examining specific case studies where those four authors strove for much broader reviews.

It is to the latter that I turn here, specifically a poem in which gods may have been directly linked with punishing certain forms of conduct. I will concentrate on the content of *lausavísa* 19, rather than considering it as a performance, its genre or its relationship to the difficult to define concept of *níð* (an accusation of dishonour; see further fn. 8). These are fascinating topics but would pull the discussion in more directions than the space of this article allows (see instead Almqvist 1965; Lindow 2020, 499; Noreen 1922).

I will approach the text with three research questions in mind:

1. Were the gods perceived as being aware of and concerned with human actions?
2. What types of transgressions do they seem to care about?
3. What is their supposed efficacy?

Through these questions, I hope to move towards answering a larger query: does Old Norse religion reflect or engender moral norms? Following the definitions set out in Gert and Gert (2017), the term *morality* will be used descriptively as "certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group (such as a religion), or accepted by an individual for her own behaviour." For the purposes of this study, I am therefore interested in whether the gods were perceived as concerned with human adherence to that code of conduct and with punishing individuals who flouted it (cf. Raffield, Price and Collard 2019, 13).

<sup>3</sup> On those advances in the Cognitive Science of Religion, in particular, see Atkinson, Latham and Watts 2015; Brown and Eff 2010; Lang, et al. 2019; Norenzayan 2015; Shariff, et al. 2016; Xygalatas 2013. Among influential surveys of the political development of Viking Age Iceland and Scandinavia are Hedeager 2011; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999; Line 2007; Myhre 2015; Näsman 1999; Orri Vésteinsson 2005.

Egill makes for a good test subject. As I have shown elsewhere (Taggart forthcoming), he was a prolific moral thinker with clear opinions on the behaviour of his contemporaries and who was in many ways reflective of the society around him. A major issue for this study concerns the authenticity of his poetry. While his major poems, *Arinbjarnarkviða*, *Hofuðlausn* and *Sonatorrek*, tend to be accepted as genuine (though far from universally; for an introduction to these arguments, see Poole 2010, 177–81), his *lausavísur* are a lot more divisive (compare, for example, the varying accounts given by Campbell 1971, 4–7; Harris 2010, 152f.; Hreinn Benediktsson 1963; Jón Helgason 1969; Larrington 1992, 50f.; Myrvoll 2014, 334f.; Poole 2010, 174f.; Þorgeir Sigurðsson 2019).

*Lausavísa* 19 is no exception. Olof Sundqvist’s statement that the stanza “is believed by most scholars to have been composed by the historic Egill” (2016, 304) typifies one side of the argument; on the other is Jón Helgason, who argues that the poem exhibits linguistic and poetic characteristics that would date it to after the tenth century (1969, 157–58). Re-examining this material recently, Klaus Johan Myrvoll is ambivalent about the significance of the poetic characteristics for dating (2014, 82). Helgason’s linguistic anomaly is harder to discount. In his view, the verb *granda* (to damage) in *lausavísa* 19 should take a dative object and in this period that would entail that the following noun, *vé* (cult place, sanctuary), be *véi* (singular) or *véum* (plural), both of which would spoil the metre. *Vé*, he contends, is either in the accusative case (singular or plural) or a younger variety of the dative singular (Jón Helgason 1969, 157).

Besides the possibility that the *lausavísa* is young, I see two viable reasons for the form *vé* in Egill’s poem. The first is that the poetry was altered in the course of transmission, although, if so, given the formal problems with emending *vé* to a dative form, these lines would have to have been substantially different when first composed or hypermetrical.<sup>4</sup> The other is simply that *vé* was acceptable here even in Egill’s day. Helgason himself accepts the possibility that *granda* could actually have taken accusative as well as dative objects, although scanning through the poetic corpus for parallels, I can find only one possible instance, “*granda frið*” (to damage peace; *lausavísur* from *Styrbjarnar þátr Svíakappa*, st. 3), and even there the poet may have intended for *frið* to indicate the dative singular case of *friðr* without ending, as unusual as that would be for that word (the norm is *friði*; cf. Noreen 1923, §393–97). I have struggled without success to find a reliable witness to the dative singular form of *vé* from Egill’s time or before, whether in poetry or runes. Helgason does not himself provide one and presumably relies instead on a reconstruction of the word’s evolution from the Proto-Germanic adjective *\*wīha-* (holy) (cf. Noreen 1923, §133, 357, 363).

As such, given the lack of evidence to the contrary, it may be that *vé* was a dative singular form in usage earlier than the stipulative norm expects, and especially that the form would be used in poetry, as it is in *lausavísa* 19, when it suits the poet’s

<sup>4</sup> *Lausavísa* 19 is extant in all three redactions of *Egils saga*, including in two medieval manuscripts, Möðruvallabók (AM 132 fol) and Wolfenbüttel codex, 9. 10. Aug. 4to. As E.O.G. Turville-Petre has said, despite variation across these manuscripts, modern editors generally agree on their text (1976, 22).

metrical needs better than *véi*.<sup>5</sup> As one of my anonymous reviewers kindly pointed out, Finnur Jónsson also takes this perspective in his *Lexicon Poeticum* (whilst offering up the possibility of a dative *véi*; 1931, s.vv. “granda,” “vé”). Alternatively, Egill may have been content with *granda* taking the accusative. In either case, the anomaly disappears.

Any analysis of *lausavísa* 19 must nevertheless come with the caveat that no one can guarantee that the stanza or any part of it was conceived by Egill. However, the same is true of a great deal of early Viking Age poetry, to greater and lesser extents. Doubt does not mean we should disregard a poem like this one with its potential benefits to the study of Old Norse religion, social interaction and morality. Instead, the investigation of this text should be performed cautiously and conclusions accompanied by provisos related to the verses’ uncertain genesis. In that spirit, I will refer to the figure responsible for *lausavísa* 19 as Egill throughout this article, while acknowledging the possibility that a historical Egill was not its poet nor the poet of many of the other stanzas ascribed to him.

The narration around *lausavísa* 19 in *Egils saga* has to be even more in question, given that, regardless of how indebted to oral tradition it is or is not, the saga’s prose was written down many centuries after its events supposedly took place (on the impulses governing thirteenth-century depictions of the Saga Age (with special consideration given to *Egils saga*), see Harris 1986). Elements of the narrative may reflect incidents that did occur or at least Old Norse attitudes to behaviour at legal and cult sites; nevertheless, the research that follows will principally concentrate on the poetry.

## Discussion

*Lausavísa* 19 does not outright declare that the gods disapprove of the list of acts with which Egill confronts them: plundering property, being an unfit ruler, spoiling *vé*.

Svá skyldi goð gjalda,  
gram reki þond af hǫndum,<sup>6</sup>  
reið sé rǫgn ok Óðinn,  
rǫn míns féar hǫnum;

folkmýgi lát flœja,  
Freyr ok Njörðr, af jörðum,  
leiðisk lofða stríði  
landǫss, þanns vé grandar.

(So the gods should repay him  
for the plunder of my property,

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Stefan Brink (pers. comm.) for discussing with me the development of this word.

<sup>6</sup> My edition, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, follows Wolfenbüttel codex, 9. 10. Aug. 4to here, offering “reka af hǫndum” (drive away) where other manuscripts have “reka af lǫndum” (drive from his lands). Both are acceptable readings, although the second better harmonizes with other elements of the stanza connecting the king, the land and divinity; cf. *Egils saga*, 93; Olsen 1944, 189.

the divine confederacy drive the king away,  
the powers and Óðinn be angry;

Freyr and Njörðr, make the people-oppressor  
flee from his lands;  
loathe the harmer of the praiseworthy,  
*landþóss*, that one who damages a cult place.<sup>7</sup>)

These verses do, however, raise a few related questions. They could imply that the catalogued behaviours are viewed as abhorrent to the gods, yet the structuring of the stanza as an argument discounts that to an extent, contending instead a perception that the gods' sentiments are not fixed but can be swayed through petition and debate. The lines could even suggest a belief that the gods would punish such actions but might not be aware of those actions until they were pointed out to them.

## Gods and their Information

Looking at this last element first – the awareness the gods have of the world – there is an invocatory quality to the text and in particular to the torrent of divine names, which may have been intended simply to acknowledge the gods, included as markers of respect or considered necessary to get their attention.<sup>8</sup> Prayers in traditions that claim theologies of omniscience similarly employ forms of address for deities, presumably because the same systems of cognition that are used to talk to other humans are also used to talk to higher powers and perhaps also, even in those traditions, due to a subconscious assumption that a god *does* need to be named to focus on an individual (cf. Barrett and Keil 1996; Heiphetz et al. 2016; Schjoedt et al. 2009; Shtulman and Rattner 2018). In either case, whether or not the naming was seen as effecting an audience with the gods or they are believed to be already aware of the poet's enmity with Eiríkr, Egill is presuming that the deities he names are or will become aware of his invocation – in effect, he presumes the gods have greater-than-human awareness of his actions.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of *landþóss*, as well as the identity of the deity referred to by that title, is discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> See further the discussions in Raffield, Price and Collard 2019 and, taking a more positive outlook, Taggart 2019 and Taggart 2021. Elsewhere in Egill's poetry, I have only found supernatural monitoring arguably referred to in B-redaction manuscripts of *Hofuðlausn*, st. 3, in which Óðinn surveys the dead on a battlefield.

<sup>9</sup> According to *Egils saga* (ch. 58), the *lausavisa* is pronounced after the chaos prompted by the *þing* has settled down and Egill is boarding a ship, supposedly to return to Iceland. Magnus Olsen instead proposes that *lausavísur* 19 and 20 (the latter comes a little later in the saga's text, in chapter 59) could have been carved in runes onto a *níðstǫng* (shame-pole) that Egill reportedly erects to curse and insult Eiríkr and Gunnhildr (1916; cf. Almqvist 1965; Porter 2008, 119f.; the passage involving the *níðstǫng* is also found in *Egils saga*, ch. 59). This is as impossible to verify as the circumstances in the saga. If there is anything to Olsen's speculation, it is possible that the gods were therefore expected not to hear the invocation but to read it. Regardless, and unless the pole was, for example, seen as having been made sacred through Egill's actions and therefore offering supernatural creatures greater awareness of

A further implication of the gods' awareness of Egill's *lausavísa* is that Eiríkr's actions should be available to them as well. However, if the charges Egill makes against Eiríkr are false, then that would undermine the sense that the poet consciously believes human actions are available for the gods' scrutiny and judgement. Amongst those charges, the accusation that Eiríkr "vé grandar" (damages a cult place [or cult places]) is the most specific and verifiable by a modern audience. Would Eiríkr have conducted such a crime? The answer is not straightforward, particularly given the confusion over the grammatical number of *vé* and when that king's religion is under doubt.

Anders Hultgård has performed a brief overview of Eiríkr's Christianity and finds a range of medieval thought: some sources do not bring up the topic (perhaps finding Eiríkr's reputation difficult to reconcile with the model of a Christian king) whereas others state that he was a Christian convert. All Hultgård can conclude, given significant disagreement in his sources, is that "presumably he died as a Christian, but during the few years he ruled Norway he must have acted ritually in accordance with what a people attached to inherited traditions expected from him" (2011, 308f.). *Eiríksmál*, a panegyric that imagines an Eiríkr being welcomed into Valhöll by Óðinn and Hultgård's focus in his discussion, implies at least respect for Old Norse traditions by the king's circle, if the protagonist is indeed Eiríkr blóðøx and not another king of the same name, which would make a campaign eradicating *vé* seem less likely.<sup>10</sup>

Of the specific charge that Eiríkr destroyed cult places in Norway, the only possible authentication I find comes from *Hákonardrápa*, probably by Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, a poet with a reportedly positive relationship to Egill: "Gamla kind, sús granda, / ... véum þorði" (the descendant(s) of Gamli, who dared to damage cult places; st. 1).<sup>11</sup> The identity of that *kind* (kin) is unsure and could refer to Eiríkr's sons, the eldest of whom was named Gamli. However, as Edith Marold proposes, because *kind* more usually refers to descendants than brothers, Einarr more likely refers to a descendant of Gormr inn gamli, Eiríkr's maternal grandfather, or a group of them (*Hákonardrápa*, 280; cf. Finnur Jónsson 1931, s.v. "kind"): Eiríkr himself or, as my anonymous reviewer suggests, Eiríkr and his sons. The phrasing ("granda, / ... véum") actually echoes *lausavísa* 19 (Kock 1923–44, §2736), although here *vé* is definitely a plural. Therefore, while the provenance of the corroboration for Egill's charge is suspect (a probable close relation, using language that may have been inspired by Egill's work), *Hákonardrápa* would seem to corroborate the charge against Eiríkr in *lausavísa* 19.

actions conducted near it or related to it (cf. Purzycki 2013), the gods presumably need greater-than-human awareness of the world to hear or see the text, if they are not being viewed as physically present for the performance or carving.

<sup>10</sup> While the poem is cited in relation to blóðøx's death in one of the recensions of *Fagrskinna* (*Ágrip*, 77), that association could have arisen in the course of the anonymous poem's later transmission (Downham 2004, 62f.; cf. Hultgård 2011, 308f.).

<sup>11</sup> On the attribution of this stanza, see *Hákonardrápa*, 279, and on Egill's relationship with Einarr, *Egils saga*, ch. 80.

If *vé* is singular, an alternative clarification of Egill's accusation presents itself. In Sundqvist's analysis of *lausavísa* 19 and the related conflict at the Guláþing (built on *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 163 n.), he allows that Eiríkr may have destroyed temples but prefers the idea that the *þing* itself could have been the sacred space to which Egill refers. Referring to the laws of the *þing* that served medieval Trøndelag and its surrounding area, and to the beefy punishments meted out therein for breaking the *þing*'s peace, Sundqvist suggests that Egill's *vé* was the sacred space instituted at the assembly for its proceedings (2016, 304f.; cf. *Frostatingslova*, I, 2). According to *Egils saga*, ch. 57, in that area, “settar niðr heslistengr í vøllinn í hring, en lögð um útan snæri umhverfis; váru þat kølluð véþond” (hazel poles [were] fixed in a ring on the field, and tethered around the outside with a cord; those were called the *véþond*); that space is profaned with the attack of Gunnhildr's men. The last phrase in the quote, *véþond* (sacred bonds), gives a sense of how taboo the actions of Gunnhildr's men would be, when they not only encroach on the area but actually cut down the ropes and break the poles. If the text of *Egils saga* is a folk memory based on a reality in which Eiríkr's party did infringe a *þing*'s sacrality, the *vé* of Egill's poetry could refer to the sacred area delimited by the *véþond*, as Sundqvist proposes (Porter 2008, 121, makes the same identification).

Neither the law code referred to by Sundqvist nor *Egils saga* itself are contemporary with the Guláþing assembly and as such they make for problematic guides to the poetry; they definitively verify neither the charge of debasing a cult place (and hence Egill's perception of the gods' omniscience) nor the provenance of the *lausavísa* itself, which could have been composed based on the prose rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, Sundqvist's argument is the best guide we have to the meaning of *vé grandar* in *lausavísa* 19 (as well as additional support for reading *vé* in the singular).<sup>12</sup>

There is nothing, therefore, in *lausavísa* 19 that discounts the proposition that Eiríkr's actions were believed to be open to the gods' scrutiny, in the same way that the poetry's own recital must be if the gods are supposed to hear it.

## Crimes and Punishment

Based on this short snatch of poetry, I do not think we can take the question of the gods' omniscience much further. The most credible way of viewing their naming is within the only concrete framework we have for the act: the poetry. As such, that is the perspective that I will take for the rest of this article, examining the effects of *lausavísur* 19 on its audience – and while the connection of the poem with a human

<sup>12</sup> Following on from a point raised in fn. 8, it is worth considering that, if the *vé* referred to a space within *véþond* or one akin to a temple, its destruction was seen as more easily perceived by the gods than the ruin of a profane space. In a study by Benjamin Grant Purzycki (2013), supernatural figures in southern Siberia known as *Cher eezi* are more likely to be perceived as aware of an action when it happens close to the ritual cairns designated for them (or at a type of resource with which they are associated). A comparable situation could have been operative for perceptions of Old Norse gods (on the sacrality of spaces in early Scandinavia and Iceland, and the practical consequences of that status, see Sundqvist 2016).



audience is itself significant (as are the political consequences of that interaction), it is the purported divine audience that will be the focus here.

Eiríkr stands accused of perhaps as many as four transgressions: of “*rón*” (plunder); of being a “*folkmýgir*” (people-oppressor) and, relatedly, a “*lofða stríðir*” (harmer of the praiseworthy); and, finally, that he “*vé grandar*” (damages a cult place).<sup>13</sup> Each of these is a transgression against the most general code of conduct in Eiríkr’s society (if only in the latter case from the perspective of followers of Old Norse gods), ordered in such a way as to trace a movement from offences that are personal in nature, through those affecting the polity over which Eiríkr is king, before finally incorporating the gods themselves in the wronged group.

Plunder is the centrepiece moral failing of the *lausavísa* (for an overview of the various levels of this crime, viewed through a saga lens, see Andersson 1984, 496–505; cf. *Grágás*, II, 162–65). As much as that infraction implies a smaller scale than the others, it is also the only one for which a word like *gjalda* (repay) is used and the only one cited in the first *helmingr* of the poem. It is the injustice that Egill desires rebalanced by the gods. The pushing of the other crimes into the second *helmingr* suggests that they are there to support Egill’s pursuit of compensation, as added evidence in the case against Eiríkr.

The first of these remaining accusations, the charge that Eiríkr is a *folkmýgir* (people-oppressor), makes the *rón* (plunder) against Egill emblematic of the king’s behaviour towards people more generally; simultaneously, it propels the discussion into the realm of Eiríkr’s unsuitability for kingship, which, after all, chiefly concerns the administration of those people and their land. Edel Porter neatly teases out this dimension of this kenning and of the one that follows it, “*lofða stríðir*”:

Eiríkr has committed a crime against the natural order of inheritance and has become the oppressor instead of the protector. Egill signifies this role-reversal in the kennings that he uses to refer to Eiríkr. Whereas a typical epithet for a king or prince in Old Icelandic poetry would be “protector of the people”, Egill chooses to call him “oppressor of the people” and “the enemy of the people” (Porter 2008, 123).

Kennings for leaders might present them as guiding or helping warriors or other groups of people, guarding the land or, simply, ruling (e.g. *Erfidrápa Óláfs helga*, st. 6; *Hofuðlausn* b, st. 13; *Poem about Óláfr Tryggvason*, st. 7; *Þórsdrápa*, st. 10). The closest equivalent I have spotted to Egill’s kenning for Eiríkr is Snorri Sturluson’s “*þrøngvir þings*” (the oppressor of the assembly; *Háttatal* b, st. 41), and such a lack of broader

<sup>13</sup> A similar perspective guides Egill’s *lausavísa* 20, which, despite focusing on Gunnhildr, with its first word calls Eiríkr “*lögbrigðir*” (law-breaker) and later “*sökkva bræðra*” (sinker of brothers), adding fratricide to his list of crimes. Through *lausavísa* 16, Eiríkr’s transgression could be regarded as a failure to ensure that oaths were kept, a topic of great pertinence in Old Norse society and one frequently given a religious dimension in the surviving sources but not specifically addressed in *lausavísa* 19: see Raffield, Price and Collard 2019, 8, 10; Riisøy 2016).

support for “folkmygir” being used as flattery would seem to confirm that the oppression of people is, if not a crime, then at least a moral failing in a leader.<sup>14</sup>

The circumlocution “lofða stríðir” (harmer of the praiseworthy) was probably calculated, similarly, as an accusation. It could have been intended as a simple warrior or ruler kenning: naturally a successful combatant must harm others, and there exists enough comparable instances of a ruler being called, say, a “bági ljóna” (adversary of men; *Ynglingatal*, st. 3) and “orðrakkr þrýstir jofra” (word-upright subjugator of princes; *Gráfeldardrápa*, st. 6) that “lofða stríðir” is not totally out of character for Old Norse poetry. Yet kennings praising martial ability tend not to be so direct as to specify that another warrior is being harmed, working instead through analogy, through the feeding of carrion animals or the destruction or use of weaponry (e.g. *Brúðkaupsvisur*, st. 27; *Líknarbraut*, st. 6; *Óláfs drápa Tryggvasonar*, st. 20). Especially given the disposition of the stanza as a whole towards Eiríkr, the choice of such a positive word as *lofði* to describe the king’s victims (related to *lof* (praise) and the name of a mythical king (see Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. “Lofði”)) would therefore seem to cast Eiríkr as a malign agent.<sup>15</sup> Another *jofurr* (prince) might be crushed in the ordinary and praiseworthy course of things for an early Norwegian king where a *lofði* ought not be. As such, the kenning contributes to the building sense of Eiríkr’s unsuitability as ruler by referring to his inability to lead a particular, elite social class, adding ammunition to Egill’s charge that Eiríkr should be not only punished for the theft but removed from his position of power. The moral failings of a king might be different from those of someone of another social station and have different punishments. Certainly, Egill makes a vice of Eiríkr’s rank, using it to contextualize and further censure the king’s behaviour.

The last of Eiríkr’s alleged crimes can, once more, be analysed with reference to kennings from other poems: several skaldic texts directly connect rulers with the maintenance of religious sites, calling them, for example, “valdr vés” (sovereign of the cult place; *Sigurðardrápa*, st. 6) and “vörðr véstalls” (warden of the cult place’s altar; *Ynglingatal*, st. 11).<sup>16</sup> While the role of political leaders in the oversight of such places remains obscure, it does seem to have been part of the portfolio of their duties during

<sup>14</sup> Kings may be called *harðráðr* (hard-ruling) – Eiríkr, for example, is a “harðráðr / hersa mygir” (hard-ruling crusher of chieftains) according to *Nóregs konungatal*, st. 11 – though that adjective can be intended as anything from a compliment (as it is in e.g. *Háttatal* b, st. 12) to disparagement (*Drömmvevers: Af Stjörnu-Oddadraumr* II, st. 9), which makes it a difficult comparison with Egill’s descriptions of Eiríkr. The kenning just cited from *Nóregs konungatal* itself may have been designed to defame Eiríkr as an oppressor of people in the same way as Egill’s similarly phrased *folkmygir* (and the stanza’s tone shades that way), although it also invokes the trope of praising leaders for subduing their peers.

<sup>15</sup> *Lofði* could actually refer to Egill himself. Whilst this would be in keeping with Egill’s self-aggrandizement in, for example, *lausavísa* 2 (assuming that stanza is written by Egill; cf. Kock 1923–44, §2730), it more likely refers to a wider group because *lofði* is never otherwise employed in skaldic poetry in the singular, as far as I can tell.

<sup>16</sup> *Hákonarmál*, st. 18, is also relevant and so too might be the inscription on the Rök stone (Ög 136); on this topic more generally, see Sundqvist 2016, 167–92, 305–07.

this period, making Eiríkr's spoiling one or more *vé* a glaring moral transgression. He has not so much failed to uphold the statutes in his society's code of conduct that apply to him as undertaken actions directly to the contrary of them.

As such, and continuing the theme established with Porter's analysis of *folkmygir*, the demolition of the *vé* is the final element in a developing pattern of behaviour. Egill is again depicting Eiríkr as a failing king, who is not merely lax in his duties but rather actively perverting them and tearing down at least one communal object in the process. The established pattern enlarges *lausavisa* 19's discussion, so that it no longer affects just two people but the whole community up to and including the gods themselves. This has two further ramifications. Firstly, and most subtly, the reference to the *vé* in the moral and political context forged by the statements of Eiríkr's other crimes (and especially the two kennings) functions as a demonstration of the ideal of Eiríkr's relationship with the gods: he is effectively a worker for them, not only in managing their cult places but also an intermediary in maintaining the proper functioning of society and the land.<sup>17</sup> This is a theme I explore further below when examining more closely the identities of the gods Egill cites in his poetry. Secondly, the mention of the *vé* makes Eiríkr's crimes personal again, a direct affront to the gods to whom Egill is appealing – to the judges rather than the plaintiff.

A doctrine of transactionalism underpins the morality of the other poetry attributed to Egill (Taggart forthcoming), and it is just as apparent here; as Porter says, "The language used in this stanza evokes a sense of right and wrong. A reversal needs to take place" (2008, 123). Eiríkr has committed an offence against Egill and must, in the poet's own indicatively mercantile language, "gjalda" (pay, repay).<sup>18</sup> The degree to which this principle governs Egill's thinking, even in his conversations with the divine, is indicated by the term's reuse in *lausavisa* 20 (the next set of verses in *Egils saga*, likewise complaining about Eiríkr and Gunnhildr to a supernatural dignitary), in which Egill declares "Gunnhildi ák gjalda" (I have to repay Gunnhildr). Here, the

<sup>17</sup> Here my investigation begins to butt up against theories of sacral kingship, a research field with a long history that has been renewed over the last thirty years by scholars like the honorand of this publication Jens Peter Schjødt (1990), Gro Steinsland (2000) and Olof Sundqvist (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Petition, often in relation to sacrifice, is a fairly universal form of interaction with deities, and Egill's firmly transactional moral ideology may imply that he expects the gods to take his side as repayment for previous personal devotion. If so, that is not obvious from *lausavisa* 19 (on the varying rationales for prayer, see Gill 2005; Johnson 2004, 225–27; Spilka 2005, 371–74; Spilka and Ladd 2013, esp. ch. 3). Probably the lines from *Sonatorrek*, st. 22–23, on Egill's relationship with Óðinn are educational here: Egill describes a misplaced expectation that Óðinn would protect his family out of a spirit of reciprocity for worship given, before ultimately acknowledging that holding supernatural forces to human standards is an absurdity (Taggart forthcoming). Even if Egill is attempting to push the gods into fulfilling a perceived obligation to him with *lausavisa* 19, *Sonatorrek* implies he does not expect them to fulfil that kind of contract consistently. While Egill *may* be assuming that the gods will intervene on his behalf against Eiríkr in exchange for previous worship, that is not manifest in *lausavisa* 19 as it survives today. On the personal character of relationships with Old Norse gods, see Ström 1990, 374f.; Sundqvist 2016, 88–90.

modal verb *eiga* (have (to)) lends an urgency to Egill's transactionalist vengeance – even a sense of moral obligation – that is more insistent than the (still pressing) equivalent use of *skulu* (shall) in *lausavísa* 19. The compensation Egill envisages, moreover, also fits into the transactional model: Egill does not want every third-born in Eiríkr's kingdom to pass away in the night, plagues of midges or the spread of foot rot among the king's sheep. Rather, the (very human) punishment he solicits fits Eiríkr's crime. Bad kingship and withholding an inheritance of property should be met, Egill argues, by unburdening the offender of his own lands and, in effect, the end of his rule.<sup>19</sup> In this light, the appeal to the destruction of the *vé* constitutes a hope that transactionalism will take effect when it applies to conduct within the gods' specific realm – when the gods themselves are one of the injured parties seeking justice.<sup>20</sup>

### Arguments and Persuasion

As human as the punishment is, so too are the crimes; with only the last allegation about the *vé* providing a partial exception, each of these crimes concerns how individuals relate to and control one another. Egill is trying to persuade the gods to care about what humans care about. Alongside the listing of crimes and gods, the poet uses several rhetorical techniques to aid in his bargaining. The first is the employment of constructions using modal and subjunctive verbs to impute a sense of wishfulness; Egill tends not to tell the gods what should happen, but rather attempts to construct a vision of a world in which proper order has been restored with the gods' help. Only once does he move into the imperative, beginning the second *helmingr* “*folkmýgi lát flœja*” (make the people-oppressor flee), and there the verb *láta* (allow, cause) softens Egill's command with its undertones of permissiveness. Even with that imperative, the tone at the start of the second *helmingr* is more hope than expectation.

Egill generates a greater deal of emphasis through the placement of words and clauses. The very first word of the second *helmingr*, for example, is “*folkmýgir*” (people-oppressor), and this stress suggests that Egill expects his audience to be impressed with that concept in and of itself. The clause that begins the poem engages with emphasis in a more playful and, ultimately, more intriguing way: “*svá skyldi goð gjalda...*” (so the gods should repay...). In a sense, *lausavísa* 19 begins at the end, the adverb of manner *svá* (so, in this way) implying that the first *helmingr* is the definitive conclusion to an argument that has not been provided – in effect, that the argument has been settled already. This assumes that *lausavísa* 19 never followed another stanza that contained previous argumentation (perhaps one like *lausavísa* 20) and that its

<sup>19</sup> Egill also calls on the gods to “*leiðask*” (loathe) Eiríkr. The ramifications of this require further research and more space than is available in this article. Good work, however, has already been conducted on the consequences of the removal of divine favour by Raffield, Price and Collard (2019).

<sup>20</sup> That Eiríkr was subsequently displaced in reality perhaps supports the proposition that *lausavísa* 19 was composed after the fact, as foreshadowing for later events in the saga or to glorify the Old Norse gods who, according to this stanza, would have brought the king's removal about.

*helmingar* have not been reversed in the course of transmission. These are both possibilities, but it is not out of character for Egill or other skalds to begin a loose stanza in this way (e.g. *lausavísa* 5; *lausavísur* a, st. 12; *lausavísur* b, st. 1, 13; *lausavísur* c, st. 23, 43). As *lausavísa* 19 stands today, it opens emphatically.

Egill uses multiple strategies – persuasion, demanding, listing, emphasis, the gradual magnification of Eiríkr’s crimes – to increase the power of his appeal to supernatural forces. Yet, by so consciously structuring *lausavísa* 19 as an argument, Egill undermines the stanza’s ability to achieve its goals. He displays (at least) a lack of confidence that gods like Freyr and Óðinn unfailingly oversee a system of transactional justice and concedes that they may not care about his legal case any more than Eiríkr did himself. The gods do not act out of a sense of duty. They have to be appealed to. Convinced. The poem is shaped without expectation of success but in hope of it. On the other hand, in other religious traditions, asking gods for intercession does not contradict believing in their omniscience nor in crediting them with an interest in human morality (see e.g. the discussions in Clements-Jewery 2016; Fales 2010); it may not be a logical contradiction here either, and the report of *rón* on Eiríkr’s rap sheet does imply that Egill sees the gods as potential judges over individual as well as communal and religious matters, even if they have to be persuaded to some extent to take note and action.

Egill’s audience is human as well as divine, and the unfolding of his argument has an empowering effect on our image of the poetry’s author and a diminishing one on that of his enemy. The poetry may have an impact on the political milieu around Eiríkr and on the king’s reputation, even if it does not succeed in cajoling a god into action. In that second respect, however, its message is mixed. The gods should be concerned with these charges, Egill seems to argue, even while the fact that he is arguing at all indicates doubts that they will be or an assumption that they are more responsive when asked.

### *Bond* and their Functions

Egill does not limit his appeal but addresses several gods individually as well as the gods collectively. By listing so many, Egill offers no sense that he understands a specific deity as burdened with obligations related to morality, injustice or even the law and rather believes that any of them could equally take an interest in his arguments (cf. de Vries 1970, II, §350; Dumézil 1973, 43–48).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps more surprisingly, Egill’s blanket appeal intimates that, in his opinion, the gods share moral values – that Óðinn, for example and despite his transgressive actions in legends and myths, is not less likely to esteem prosocial behaviour in humans than, say, Freyja or Þórr. Mythic representations of deities, therefore, may not be exactly mappable onto the attitudes credited to those gods in everyday matters of practice.

<sup>21</sup> For recent investigations of the limits of the theory that Old Norse gods had specific natural and social functions, see Gunnell 2015; Taggart 2018.

Nevertheless, among the terms used to group the gods, “*bönd*” (bonds, the gods, confederacy) stands out. A common skaldic byname for the gods (see Marold 1992, 705–07; Simek 2010, 11), *bönd* recalls the *vébönd* that are said to be broken by Gunnhildr at the assembly and would seem to reinforce the link between the poetry and the events of the prose. Edith Marold points, as well, to the frequency with which *bönd* appears alongside words like *reka* (drive away), as it does in *lausavísa* 19, and suggests that the name therefore has strong connotations of guardianship over a region of land (1992, 705; also, Simek 2010, 11). If so, it is an apposite choice for this poem about justice, kingship and inheritance. The other collective terms Egill uses for divinities, “*goð*” (gods) and “*rögn*” (the powers), have no obvious special meaning here and may have been partly chosen to fulfil the demands of alliteration. *Bönd* itself participates in internal rhyme, so perhaps its resonances are coincidental, although my study of *landóss* below observes similar connotations in that name and thereby advocates for the mindfulness of Egill’s poesis here.

The choice of which individual gods are named, however, may in large part be dictated by the requirements of the *dróttkvætt* metre, alongside those deities’ prominence. Looking at the phrase “*rögn ok Óðinn*” (the powers and Óðinn), the separation of Óðinn from the other *rögn* is among the more curious factors at work in this stanza. It may reflect a higher position for that god in an Old Norse pantheon; a demarcation of Óðinn as the leader of the *rögn* or as a god of personal import to Egill (also the implication of *Sonatorrek*, st. 22–23); a special function for Óðinn in respect of justice; or simply the need for a half-rhyme with “*reiðr*” (angry), the word which begins the line.<sup>22</sup> The concatenation of Freyr and Njörðr in *lausavísa* 19 is echoed by their appearance in that order in stanza 17 of Egill’s *Arinbjarnarkviða*, in which they are said to provide “*féar afli*” (wealth power; i.e. the capacity to be financially generous) as well as, as Sigurður Nordal has noted, a legal oath found in (among other manuscripts) the *Hauksbók* recension of *Landnámabók* that names the two gods alongside “*hinn almáttki áss*” (the almighty *áss*; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 163 n.; cf. *Landnámabók*, H 268), a similarly obscure figure to Egill’s *landóss*. In *Skáldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson quotes *Arinbjarnarkviða* to evidence a claim that Freyr is “*árguð ok fégjafa*” (a harvest god and wealth-giver; ch. 7), though that functional aspect of Freyr’s and Njörðr’s identities does not apply to the themes of Egill’s stanza (see Þorgeir Sigurðsson 2019, 78f., 234f., especially on issues of grammatical agreement that are also relevant to *lausavísa* 19; cf. Porter 2008, 122). The names are employed to fulfil alliteration and internal rhyme, though *Freyr*, as the first fully stressed syllable in the second of a pair of lines, may dictate rather than respond to the demands of alliteration. More likely, the appearance of Freyr and Njörðr together here and in those other contexts relates to their reputed familial relationship (*Skáldskaparmál*, ch. 6–7). In *lausavísa* 19 especially, the dual naming may operate as a formulaic form of

<sup>22</sup> Various permutations have been theorized for Egill’s religious leanings, although without agreement on much beyond an attachment to Óðinn: cf. Bjarni Einarsson 1993, 154; Harris 1994; Larrington 1992, 61f.; Sigurður Nordal 1924; 1990, 123–25; Torfi H. Tulinius 2014; von See 1970.

synecdoche, in which these gods are cited to signify their family as a whole; listing them in close proximity to the “landóss,” an *áss* whose group membership is foregrounded by its name, may add another, further synecdochic dimension, representing the invocation of both the main families of the gods, the *æsir* and *vanir*, as is perhaps occurring in the case of the legal oath referenced above (*Landnámabók*, H 268).<sup>23</sup> Bringing up Freyr and Njörðr together at the very least adds to the sensation of a piling on of deities, a sensation that the poet has built towards by calling on gods, either collectively or by name, at a careful but steady rate, generally limiting naming instances to one for every two lines. The effect is purposeful and develops in force at around the same pace as the listing of Eiríkr’s crimes. The naming is part of the effect of the stanza, in other words, and of Egill’s swelling argument in front of his human and divine publics.

However, by ending with the “landóss,” a god whose identity remains conjectural, Egill may be concluding with a figure who does have a special thematic and functional import.<sup>24</sup> Similarly to most of the divine names employed by Egill, *landóss* is affected by both alliteration and full-rhyme, which leads to the suspicion that it was employed here (as opposed to another *heiti* for the same god) more to fulfil the conditions of alliterative verse than for its nuances of meaning. However, there are several reasons to think that there is more to Egill’s choice than poetic convenience: the increasingly national bearing of the crimes he lists; the appearance of the equally mysterious “landálfr” in Egill’s *lausavísa* 20;<sup>25</sup> and the positioning of *landóss* as a *hofuðstafr* (main stave). Usually, the first fully stressed syllable in the second of a pair of lines of poetry, the *hofuðstafr* is supported by *stuðlar* (props), syllables in the first line with which the *hofuðstafr* alliterates, as well as by full rhyme within the second of the pair of lines. We do not know much of the mode of composition of skaldic poetry and of course methodologies could have varied between individuals and poems. Nevertheless, according to Snorri Sturluson in the early thirteenth century, it is the *hofuðstafr* that “ræðr” (determines) the alliteration of a pair of lines and, indeed, in Snorri’s analysis the rest of the pair flows out from the basis of the *hofuðstafr* (*Háttatal* a, ch. 1; on semantic slippage and alliteration, see further Frog and Roper 2011, 29–31). If so (and the terms *hofuðstafr* and *stuðlar* themselves support the proposition), Egill may have

<sup>23</sup> The idea of a distinct collective of gods, the *vanir*, has become increasingly controversial in recent years, but it remains possible to say that there were multiple families with two being most prominent. Cf. Frog and Roper 2011; Hall 2007, 26–29, 36f., 47; Simek 2010.

<sup>24</sup> The identity of the *landóss* has been discussed by various scholars with the largest consensus pointing to Þórr. If the identity of the *landóss* did not vary from region to region, a god like Þórr or Óðinn who is categorized elsewhere in mythology as an *áss* does make the most sense (although this *landóss* may be referred to as a *landálfr* in *lausavísa* 20, which would appear to put them in a different mythological grouping again). As Óðinn has already been named in this stanza, Þórr is the next most promising candidate. The argument cannot be taken much further than this, however. Cf. de Vries 1931, 46f.; *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, 163 n.; Tapp 1956.

<sup>25</sup> The *landálfr* has seen less research than the *landóss*, but see Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson 1874, s.v. “land-álfr”; Kock 1923–44, §2421; Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1999, 153–57.

begun composing *lausavísa* 19's seventh and eighth lines with the name *landóss*, making it more likely that *landóss* was chosen for its semantics while the subordinate words in those lines were chosen because they alliterated or rhymed with the *höfuðstafr*.

Rather than the import of the *landóss* falling within the sphere of morality, though, it seems to have been a figure with responsibility for the maintenance of the land, perhaps the administration of human affairs within that territory and, probably, the very specific crime of destroying the sacred area at the Gulapíng. Surveying the uses of *land* and its compounds in the sagas, Edda R. H. Waage confirms that, besides its signification of "dry land" and "an owned place," *land* can refer to a space associated with a particular group of people, in effect a polity, with connotations of legal administration (2012, 180–83). Any of these three meanings could be operative in the name *landóss*, in which the element *land-* may therefore allude to an association with the terrain itself and, for example, its fecundity; with property ownership (and intended here to deal with the matter of the property Egill feels he is owed); or with the particular geographical area administered by the Gulapíng, rather than to a specific domain of human actions. While the first possibility recalls the fertility aspects of Freyr and Njörðr, it does not do the same with much else in the stanza (beyond, maybe, the link between satisfactory rulership and the functioning of the community and landscape). Instead, I find *land*'s third potential association the most persuasive.

From a search among the compounds of *land-* that appear in the database of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages* project, it is clear that the element was often used in poetry in relation to the circumscription of polities, communities and regions (Clunies Ross et al. 2017; cf. Edda Waage 2012, 184).<sup>26</sup> This could certainly be the same with the compound *landóss*, especially in the context of material like the fourteenth stanza of Einarr skálaglamm Helgason's *Vellekla*, which may describe a particular import for a Þórr cult in the Norway controlled by Hákon jarl (on the interpretation of this difficult stanza, see the edition's accompanying notes); of Adam of Bremen's description of the elevation of three gods (with Þórr as the mightiest of them) in Uppsala (*Hamburgische Kirchengeschichte*, IV, ch. 26); and of Stefan Brink's maps of theophoric place names, which suggests varying regional import for each god (2007).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Many thanks to Irene García Losquiño, who prompted this approach.

<sup>27</sup> Marold 1992, 702, also points to a parallel mention of the gods owning the land in Rimbert's *Vita Anskarii* (ch. 26), Brink 2002, 99–100, points to a number of assemblies and districts that may have been associated with specific deities, and Mayburd 2014, 136f., encounters several deity-like figures that are inseparable from specific regions. The other obvious comparison is the supernatural group known as the *landvættir*. Although little remains on this group and their function in the lives of early Icelanders and Scandinavians, they are mentioned in *Egils saga*'s prose: Egill supposedly erects his "níðstøng" (shame-pole) against Eiríkr and Gunnhildr shortly after composing *lausavísa* 19 and declares over it, "'Hér set ek upp níðstøng ok sný ek þessu níði á hönd Eiríki konungi ok Gunnhildi dróttningu'—hann sneri hrosshöfðinu inn á land—'sný ek þessu níði á landvættir þær er land þetta byggja svá at allar fari þær villar vega, engi hendi né hitti sitt inni fyrr en þær reka Eirík konung ok Gunnhildi ór landi'" ('Here I set up a shame-pole and I turn this invective against King Eiríkr and Queen



The term *landþóss* may signal not only that this god is popular in western Norway, in the area administered from the Guláþing, but also that its status as the pre-eminent deity of the region has been formally recognized by the central administrative and legal hub and that its role comes with specific regulatory responsibilities. The naming of the *landþóss* would, as such, imply that the king's morality has an extra, religious dimension in the sphere of governance. The king's and the regional deity's spheres of responsibility overlap to the extent that the king could be seen to operate in the region as an intermediary for the god, making Eiríkr's failings the responsibility of the *landþóss* in particular and the *landþóss* the natural authority to run to when asking for redress.

## Conclusion

*Lausavísa* 19 pulls analysis in many directions, and, as might be expected from a text that is only eight lines long, it leaves open more questions than it resolves. On the basis of its information, for example, it seems (1) that the gods should have an access to information about human action that borders on omniscience, but nevertheless their attention may need to be invoked at specific moments to be sure they are paying attention. They may be concerned about human morality, but (2) the more inflated the scale of human action, the more they are perceived likely to care about it – and they are most likely to be interested in moral transgressions that personally affect them. Regarding (3) their efficacy (and that of petitioning them), if Egill believes the gods have a duty to uphold moral norms, he does not necessarily trust they will act on it without external pressure; human intervention may have been felt to make their involvement more likely.

Gunnhildr – he directed the horse's head inwards to the land – 'I turn this invective towards those *landvættir* who live in this land so that they all go astray, not reaching nor finding their dwellings until they drive King Eiríkr and Gunnhildr out of the land' (ch. 59). Despite the problems with attesting to the veracity of this text, nevertheless the *níðstǫng* statement has prompted connections between the *landþóss* and the *landvættir* (Olsen 1916; for the other side of the argument, see Porter 2008, 119f.). Certainly a *vættir* and an *áss*, *landvættir* and *landþóss*, could have been seen as very alike or indistinguishable by the time *Egils saga* was being written down – perhaps there was semantic confusion earlier still (Mayburd 2014, 136) – and the proximity of the only mention of *landvættir* in the saga to the similarly brief cameos of the *landþóss* and the *landálfr* of *lausavísa* 20 (quoted in *Egils saga*, ch. 59, the same chapter as the *níðstǫng* episode) is galvanizing for arguments that would see them as identical. Maybe it was that proximity that prompted the mention of the *landvættir* in the first place (or vice versa, should the poetry not be as old as the text states). *Landvættir* were supernatural creatures who were often viewed as very localized, within places and regions but also to the level of individual topographical features. Indeed, the above quote from *Egils saga* makes much of their bond with the landscape. As such this may add further weight to my contention that the *landþóss* was a being with a specific, regional import. Nevertheless, I will not go further into that discussion here, given that I am already testing the limits of this article's word count and the difficulties of discussing the *landvættir* – post-conversion ideas are difficult to overcome (as in many cases) if trying to understand the *landvættir* in relation to earlier traditions. Instead, see Brink 2001, 101f.; Cochrane 2006; and, for a further brief comment on the *níðstǫng*, fn. 8.

Writing on Egill's disappointment with Óðinn in *Sonatorrek*, Joseph Harris reflects that "even Egill's suspicion of his god belongs to the milieu of Odin worship" (2010, 158f.; cf. Taggart forthcoming); in *lausavísa* 19, Óðinn is not the only potentially fickle or withholding member of the gods. Confidence is at issue in Egill's relationships with these gods; belief in their existence may not be open to debate, but trust in them – their reliability, their power – is (cf. Ström 1990, 374f.; Sundqvist 2016, 88–90). Egill's guiding moral principle may be transactionalism, but he does not expect the gods to hold themselves to that code of conduct, to repay sacrifices fairly every time or to punish those who have transgressed even against their followers.<sup>28</sup> Of course, this perception of inconsistency is not unique to Egill: petitions are routinely made to gods in many religions without sureness that the recipients will acknowledge the sacrifice or prayer and respond in the way desired (Gill 2005, s.v. "Prayer"; Johnson 2004, 225–27).

Universal claims regarding Old Norse religion and morality cannot be made on the basis of a single *lausavísa* by Egill – not even two – particularly in light of doubts over the *lausavísa*'s provenance and when the text is definitive about so very little. *Lausavísa* 19 is in keeping with the moral ethos espoused elsewhere in the corpus attributed to this poet, yet there is little in it that could not have been imagined by someone else, even as late as the thirteenth century by a Christian writing in a literary tradition that was still heavily exploiting imagery related to pre-Christian gods. Equally, the grand claims that have been made about morality and Old Norse religion in the past are themselves made on the basis of scanty evidence. Even if Old Norse thinkers like Egill were minded to record the morality of their time – and the kinds of texts that could be considered to remain from that epoch, including skaldic poetry, do not lend themselves to straightforward discussions of abstractions like morality – their ruminations could have been wiped out by antiquarians who, even if they were well-disposed to Iceland's past inhabitants, may not have appreciated works that offered a competing or even comparable morality to that of their own Christian religion. In my opinion, we should remain cautious about connecting Old Norse religion and morality, while, on the basis of evidence like Egill's *lausavísa* 19, remaining open to the possibility that those categories could be more intertwined in the minds of early Icelanders and Scandinavians than we have previously judged likely.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Raffield, Price and Collard offer similar conclusions on Old Norse gods' capriciousness more generally (2019, 14). Their verdict is partly based on mythic accounts of the gods adopting patterns of behaviour that would be shameful for humans, which I would set aside given possible Christian influence and because it is debatable how far human standards can be applied to a god (cf. e.g. Morales 2007, 42f.; McKinnell 1994, 52f., 120), but their opinion is otherwise well founded and supported by Egill's stanza.

<sup>29</sup> My thanks to my editor for this article Sophie Bønding and my anonymous reviewers for their valuable and constructive suggestions.

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