

“Little Glory Will It Bring You To Break My Short Bones” *Dvergar* and Dwarfism in Icelandic Medieval Narrative

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores representations of *dvergar* (sing. *dvergr*) in medieval Icelandic narrative sources to ascertain to what extent *dvergar* were associated with dwarfism and how these links developed over time. The first section of the study focuses on mythological representations of *dvergar*. In the second section, the analysis turns to *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*'s Túta, an early example of a human character whose physical description references *dvergar*. The final section examines the *dvergar* characters of the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and romance sagas (*riddarasögur*), which would influence later portrayals of *dvergar* in Icelandic folklore. The aim of this research is to contribute to further clarification of the historical relationship between *dvergar* and dwarfism in Icelandic narratives.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article explore les représentations des *dvergar* (sing. *dvergr*) dans les sources narratives islandaises médiévales afin de déterminer dans quelle mesure les *dvergar* étaient associés au nanisme et comment ces liens se sont développés au fil du temps. La première partie de l'étude se concentre sur les représentations mythologiques des *dvergar*. Dans la deuxième partie, l'analyse se tourne vers Túta de *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, un exemple précoce de personnage humain dont la description physique fait référence aux *dvergar*. La dernière partie examine les personnages *dvergar* des sagas légendaires (*fornaldarsögur*) et des sagas romantiques (*riddarasögur*), qui influenceront les représentations ultérieures des *dvergar* dans le folklore islandais. L'objectif de cette recherche est de contribuer à clarifier davantage la relation historique entre les *dvergar* et le nanisme dans les récits islandais.

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vergar (ON sing. *dvergr*, modern Icelandic sing. *dvergur*) have featured in Icelandic narrative from the earliest written sources. Originally used to denote supernatural beings, the noun has come to describe individuals with dwarfism in some texts from the medieval era onwards. This paper explores representations of *dvergar* across Icelandic medieval narrative tradition to ascertain to what extent they were associated with dwarfism and how these links developed over time.¹ The aim of this research is to contribute to further clarification of the relationship between *dvergar* and dwarfism within the field of Icelandic narrative studies, whilst also scrutinising the foundation of a central aspect of modern stereotypical portrayals of people with dwarfism—namely, their association with the Norse world and the *dvergar* of Nordic mythology and folklore (Pritchard 2017, 5–6).

The article is split into three sections. The first deals with thirteenth-century sources on mythological *dvergar*. These are the poems of the Edda, whose subject matter is pre-Christian mythology and heroic legend, and the works of Christian-era writer Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) on mythology. While stature—short or otherwise—does not seem to have defined the earliest *dvergar*, I argue that this may already have started to change by the thirteenth century. In support of this notion, the second section concerns what is likely the earliest Icelandic narrative about a non-supernatural, short *dvergr*, the court entertainer Túta. An analysis of Túta’s portrayal in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* in the thirteenth-century manuscript *Morkinskinna* and the later manuscript *Flateyjarbók* focuses on the cultural ideas which underpin the portrayal of a character likely conceived as having dwarfism.² The final section then explores the representation of characters identified in broad terms by Schäffe (2015, 369) as “saga dwarves.” These are found in fourteenth- to seventeenth-century literary works—the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and romance sagas (*riddarasögur*). With an emphasis on the influence of European chivalric romance in making short stature an identifying feature of many *dvergar*, I explore how two conceptions of *dvergar* fused to create a stock character that is still recognisable in twentieth-century Icelandic folklore—that is, of a supernatural, rock-dwelling *dvergr* who is recognisable by their short and disproportionate build.

To analyze the role of physical difference in representations of Túta and select “saga dwarves,” I look to the field of cultural disability studies, as researchers within this discipline have built a strong foundation to analyze representations of dwarfism. The relationship between dwarfism and disability is nuanced, however, and not all people with dwarfism consider themselves disabled (Shakespeare et al. 30). To apply a disability studies framework, I build on an understanding of disability as it is described by Davis (50), as not the presence of an impairment, but rather the reception and construction of that

difference. The importance of challenging how dwarfism as a difference is constructed in narrative is emphasized by Pritchard, who deems the rarity of dwarfism and its contrasting abundance in cultural representations problematic, “as it allows a false representation to be constructed and rarely challenged” (2021, 135).

Dvergar in Eddic Poetry and Snorri Sturluson’s Works

Narratives of mythological dvergar, preserved in thirteenth-century manuscripts, do not betray associations with dwarfism. There are few indications that dvergar were thought of as short in pre-Christian mythology. In rare instances of thirteenth-century descriptions which could have been informed by a notion of dvergar as small, there is little indication that this aspect of their portrayal has roots significantly pre-dating the time of writing. Continuing from Motz’s (1983, 116–17; 1973, 116) observation that appearance does not matter greatly with the dvergar of Eddic and Skaldic poetry, recent studies have also drawn attention to a lack of clear, consistent characterizations of mythological dvergar as small beings (Gunnell 2020, 1559; Mikučionis 2017; Liberman 305).³ Whether dvergar were originally conceived as having any physical form is unclear, as compelling arguments have been made that the dvergar of pre-Christian Northern Europe were invisible spirits (Mikučionis 2017, 60–62; Liberman 314–15). A runic inscription dating from the 720s found on a piece of a cranium from Ribe in Denmark contains likely the oldest Nordic reference to a dvergr. According to Grønvik’s (113; 123) interpretation, the *dvergynja* [female dvergr] Bóurr was causing illness in the son of the writer, who invokes gods Úlfr and Óðinn and Týr against the abscess and Bóurr. The name Bóurr is interpreted by Grønvik (116) as meaning the dweller of the abscess. Mikučionis (2017, 61) writes that although the Ribe inscription does not provide sufficient information to draw a conclusion, if Grønvik’s interpretation is correct, then it would be likely that dvergar—or at least this one—were perceived as invisible spirits.

Descriptions of the appearance of mythological dvergar are few. When physical descriptions are found, size is not the defining characteristic that it is to become in the legendary and romance sagas. A reference to human likeness found in stanza 10 of the Eddic poem *Völuspá* has been interpreted either to refer to the dvergar themselves, or to their creation. The stanza reads as follows in the Konungsbók and Hauksbók manuscripts respectively:

Þeir mannlíkun
 mǫrg um gørðu
 dvergar ór jørðu,
 sem Durinn sagði.
 (*Eddukvæði* 1:294 (Konungsbók))

Þeir mannlíkun
 mǫrg of gørðu
 dverga í jørðu,
 sem Durinn sagði.
 (*Eddukvæði* 1:309 (Hauksbók))

This passage is rendered “many manlike figures they made, dwarfs from the earth, as Durin recounted” in a translation by Larrington (*The Poetic Edda* 5). It has similarly been understood by Steinsland (83–85) and Tryggvi Gíslason (84–88) to refer to humans created by dvergar. Gunnell (2020, 1560–61) introduces the possibility that “mannlíkun” in this stanza could refer to the dvergar, rather than humans, referencing Snorri Sturluson’s (2005, 15) *Gylfaginning*, which describes dvergar as having the likeness of men (*mannslíki*). A physical description is found in the second stanza of the Eddic poem *Alvíssmál* of the dvergr Alvíss, described as being pale around the nostrils (*fólur um nasar*) (*Eddukvæði* 1:438). Þórr’s taunt, that this paleness could result from sleeping with a corpse, is one of many associations between dvergar and death.⁴ Other key characteristics of mythological dvergar found in Icelandic texts include an association with stones and the world underground as well as with craftsmanship.⁵ These connections appear much more consistently in characterizations of mythological dvergar than physical size, lending support to Liberman’s (306) observation that it was the dvergar’s place in the universe, rather than their size, that distinguished them.

It is nonetheless possible that physical stature could have started to play a part in how Icelandic narrators thought of dvergar around the same time that these mythological texts were written in the forms that we have access to today. The prose introduction to the Eddic poem *Reginismál*, likely significantly younger than the poem itself, raises important questions.⁶ In this text, Reginn is described as being the best of all at craftsmanship and “dvergr of vǫxt.” (*Eddukvæði* 2:296). This is translated by Larrington as “a very skilful man in making things and a dwarf in height” (*The Poetic Edda* 151). Although Reginn’s own nature has been the topic for much discussion, there are indications that some narrators considered him a dvergr, or a figure that was connected to them.⁷ Schäfke (2015, 371) includes Reginn in a category that he names “dwarf-like characters.” There are many contradictions, and Reginn is characterized

elsewhere in Eddic poetry as a *jötunn*, similarly to the *dvergr* *Alvíss* who is likened to a *þurs*—two concepts (often used interchangeably) commonly translated as “giant,” yet with a complicated relationship with physical size.⁸ Mikučionis (2020, 161–62) and Schäfke (2015, 372) have both discussed how *Reginn* is only sometimes associated with or identified as one of the *dvergar*, in a development that is likely linked to his great abilities as a smith.⁹ Notably, the term “*dvergr of vǫxt*” provides an indication that by the time that the prose introduction to *Reginismál* was written, physical stature was considered a distinguishing feature of *dvergar*.

What it meant to be a *dvergr* in stature at this time is not clear. Gunnell (2020, 1565) argues that “of *vǫxt*” could signify strength rather than size, referencing the myth that four *dvergar* hold up the sky, found in Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* (2005, 12).¹⁰ Answers have been sought in Scandinavian stone carvings depicting *Reginn*, such as the Sigurd runestone at Ramsundsberget in Södermanland from c. 1030, and the woodcarvings in the doorway of Hylestad stave church in Norway from ca. 1200–1250. Both depict *Reginn* at a similar height to Sigurðr, while, on the Sigurd runestone, he is shown with broader shoulders coupled with brawny arms. In a similar spirit to Gunnell, Mikučionis (2017, 85) proposes that *Reginn*’s “dwarfish *vǫxt* ‘shape’ refers to sturdiness and especially to the breadth of the shoulders and muscularity of the arms.” Whether Scandinavian carvers conceived of *Reginn* as a “*dvergr of vǫxt*” when they made images of him, however, is a different question, and Mikučionis (2017, 85) notes that there is very little on the Hylestad carving that distinguishes *Reginn* physically from Sigurðr.

In the Icelandic context, I contend that ideas of mythological *dvergar* as small beings had already entered narrative culture by the thirteenth century. In the next section of this article, I will discuss a thirteenth-century description of a court entertainer, *Túta*, who is said to be as short as a *dvergr* in *Morkinskinna*’s *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. Alongside *Morkinskinna*, I propose that two *dvergar* narratives from Snorri Sturluson’s works could possibly be interpreted as further indications of this shift. By proposing these examples as possible sources on *dvergar* informed by ideas of short stature, I do not mean to suggest that they are representative of all *dvergar* documented by Snorri. Nor do I consider them to inform on whether *dvergar* in pre-Christian religion were perceived as small, as there is a widespread recognition in contemporary scholarship that works such as Snorri’s *Edda* blend native concepts and lore with the concerns, learning, and narratives of continental Christian literature (Du Bois 36; Abram 207–21). They can, however, help to shed light on the possible connotations of the word in Iceland by the time Snorri was writing—connotations which likely have origins in cultural or narrative traditions

further afield. In *Gylfaginning*, Snorri describes how easily the god Þórr killed the dvergr Litr:

Þá stóð Þórr at ok vígði bálit með Mjöllni. En fyrir fótum hans rann dvergr nokkurr. Sá er Littr nefndr. En Þórr spyndi fœti sínum á hann ok hratt honum í eldinn ok brann hann.
(Snorri Sturluson 2005, 46)

[Then Thor stood by and consecrated the pyre with Miöllnir. But a certain dwarf ran in front of his feet. His name was Lit. Thor kicked at him with his foot and thrust him into the fire and he was burned.]
(Snorri Sturluson 1987, 49)

Although Þórr would be capable of kicking most beings into a fire, to my mind this passage raises the question of whether oppositions are being employed for effect; that Þórr represents strength and mass, and a dvergr, by contrast, an absence of these qualities. That absence in general is an integral feature of the representation of dvergar has been argued by Ármann Jakobsson (2005). If we are to view the text about Þórr and Littr as the juxtaposition of a large and a small figure, then it might also be worth reading this episode with consideration to critique of modern-day spectacles which draw on contrasts of people with substantial difference in size. Pritchard (2023, 8; 18) has analyzed the role of contrast in the modern phenomena of “midget wrestling” and “midget tossing.” In the former, she writes that dwarf wrestlers are used “as props to reinforce average-sized wrestlers’ strength and masculinity,” while the aim of the latter is “not to see who can throw a midget furthest, but for the average-sized man to show dominance over a smaller person.” Although I do not mean to argue that Snorri conceived of Littr as having dwarfism, the interaction between Þórr and Littr nonetheless raises questions, to my mind, of whether he employs the dvergr Littr to create a similar dynamic to that described by Pritchard—in which Þórr’s strength and physical mass is at the forefront.

Another juxtaposition of dvergar with larger mythological beings is to be found in Snorri’s *Ynglinga saga* (1941, 10) when he says of Sweden “there are *risar* [giants], and there are dvergar.” In the case of this example, parallels with other Christian-era works have been noted (Johansson 144). With consideration to the Littr episode, and the Morkinskinna description of a man as being as short as a dvergr, however, I propose that one possible reading of this juxtaposition is that it, too, builds on an understanding of dvergar as small to contrast them with larger figures. If Snorri’s representations of Littr and the dvergar of Sweden are informed by a notion of dvergar as small beings, then this would support the thesis that in thirteenth-century Iceland, connections between mythological dvergar and short stature were already making their way into narrative. This would not contradict the notion of mythological dvergar as having originally

had little connection to short stature. Similarly to how Mikučionis (2017, 58) proposes, building on Gunnell's (2007, 129) discussion of *álfar* (elves), that "different references to *dvergar* may have originated from different belief systems, which may have continued to live side by side through centuries," I suggest that conflicting ideas about the size of *dvergar* may have also coexisted in thirteenth-century Iceland, likely originating from different narrative traditions.

A Short *dvergr*: Túta in *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók*

It is from the thirteenth century that the first Icelandic example is found linking *dvergar* clearly to short stature, and likely to dwarfism. The Frisian Túta from *Sneglu-Halla þátr* is first attested to in *Morkinskinna* (GKS 1009 fol.), a compilation of sagas of Norwegian kings written in thirteenth-century Iceland. Túta is described as "lágr sem *dvergr* ok *digr*" [short as a *dvergr* and fat] (*Morkinskinna* 1:273). This phrasing is worth bearing in mind when the meaning of "dvergr of *vøxt*" in the prose introduction to *Reginismál* is considered, as it is a thirteenth-century example of an Icelandic narrator employing a comparison to *dvergar* to convey a character's short stature.

There are indications that Túta is conceived in *Morkinskinna* as a human with dwarfism. Firstly, the contrast of his girth with his short height gives a vague indication that the author may have been influenced by an understanding of disproportionate dwarfism—a type of dwarfism whereby the torso is of average size but limbs are short.¹¹ Túta is also said to have been on exhibition ("til *sýnis*") in King Haraldr's court (*Morkinskinna* 1:273). This could reference a trend of court entertainers with dwarfism, documented across Europe during the medieval era and continuing into the renaissance (Metzler 90; Adelson 11–21; Tuan 155). Tuan (169) describes how a notion of dwarf entertainers as partial and specialized beings, as opposed to free and whole persons, would have underpinned these relationships. This unequal dynamic, in which Túta is primarily defined by his short stature, has been noted in literary analyses of *Sneglu-Halla þátr*. Richards (52) analyzes Túta as one of a few medieval Icelandic *dvergar* who are seen in court, arguing that "the rarity of a dwarf intruding on society implies [. . .] a devaluing of impaired bodies."¹²

Certainly, the court dwarf phenomenon plays on a perceived incongruity. This is evidenced in the episode of *Sneglu-Halla þátr* in which the king dresses Túta in his own armour, lets him stand before the court in the drinking hall, and then offers a knife and belt to the poet who can compose a verse about Túta on the spot—a challenge which Halli accepts. In a later episode, Túta is made to bring cooked pork to Halli, who must compose a verse before the food arrives. One might imagine that Túta's short legs are a factor in this set-up. Richards

(52–53) examines how Halli’s verse about Túta in the armour plays on martial language to deride, questioning Túta’s utility in the martial space of the court, while Ármann Jakobsson (2009, 75) has looked at Halli’s verse about Túta as one of many elements in the *þáttr* which come together to create an aura of low comedy.

The type of comedy seen here fits with Shakespeare’s (1999, 48–49) description of humour dependent on the presence of the disabled person as an outsider. In such humour, he writes, “the comic stereotype of the disabled fool or clown is part of a pattern of cultural representation which always maintains physically different people as other, as alien, as the object of curiosity or hostility or pity, rather than as part of the group.” The differences of the “other” are exaggerated, while those of the group that laughs are suppressed (Shakespeare 1999, 49). This exaggeration of factors which make Túta “other” is pronounced in a later version of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, preserved in the later manuscript *Flateyjarbók* (GKS 1005 fol.). There, it says of Túta:

Þar gekk inn j haullina duergr einn er Tuta hiet. hann var friskr ath ætt. hann hafdi leingi verit med Haralldi konungi. hann var ei hæri enn þreutt barn en allra manna digrazttr og herdimestr. haufudit mikit og elldiligt hrygrinn ei allskamr en syllt j nedan þar sem fætrnir voru.

[There walked into the hall a dvergr called Tuta. He was Frisian in origin. He had been with King Haraldr for a long time. He was no taller than a three-year-old child and the most fat and broad-shouldered of all men. The head large and aged, the back not very short but *syllt* in the lower part where the legs were.]

(*Flateyjarbók* 3:418)

In the *Flateyjarbók* description, there is a markedly greater emphasis on Túta’s appearance.¹³ The adjective “*syllt*”—*sýldur* in modern Icelandic [cleft, split, notched]—has been interpreted in this context to refer to an unusually shaped lower spine (Samúelsson 4–5). In a twentieth-century continuation of the medieval court’s fascination with Túta’s body, a 1998 Icelandic newspaper featured a medical doctor’s thoughts on the possible cause of the shape described, which he deemed to be an early—if not the oldest—Icelandic description of dwarfism (Samúelsson 4–5). *Flateyjarbók*’s detailed description, which comes in place of *Morkinskinna*’s simpler “short as a dvergr and fat,” lends further support to the notion that ideas about disproportionate dwarfism had informed Túta’s characterization. This representation is bound closely with a notion of Túta as a spectacle. *Flateyjarbók*’s (3:418) use of the adjective *undrskapadr* [of wondrous shape], which is used to describe how the men perceived Túta in the king’s attire, contrasted with the simpler *undarligri*

[wonderful] in *Morkinskinna* (1:273) further solidifies this aspect of his portrayal.

Tirosh (4) describes how Old Icelandic literature was not only meant to contribute to a body of knowledge, but rather “a living tradition that had real-life implications on the identity and the legitimacy of different groups within Icelandic society.” The fact that these texts were “living” and constantly changing as part of their manuscript form, he notes, strengthens this point further. I will now draw attention to how the ideas underpinning Túta’s representation by Icelanders living over two hundred years after the events described were grounded not in the lived experiences of medieval people with dwarfism, but were rather reliant on cultural meanings attached to dwarfism. Garland Thomson (9) describes how disabled literary characters can “remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance.” Túta’s portrayal as spectacle and entertainer is an example of this. The widespread idea of the dwarf entertainer is of little relevance to the lives lived by most medieval Europeans with dwarfism (Metzler 91).

To my mind, behind the characterization of Túta lies an assumption recognized by Garland Thomson (12) that disability reduces the complex disabled person to one attribute. In Bolt’s (2021, xvi; see also 2019) work on “metanarratives of disability,” he explores how authority assumed by non-disabled people is underpinned by “a displacement of personal narratives in favour of overarching metanarratives of disability that find currency in a diverse multiplicity of cultural representations.” These metanarratives are largely defined by non-disabled people (2021, xvii). Applying this concept, Pritchard (2021, 129) identifies infantilizing and humorous depictions as aspects of the metanarrative of dwarfism. Both accounts of Túta betray an association between dwarfism and humour, while the *Flateyjarbók* description likens him to a three-year-old child.

That the characterization of Túta would have borne little relevance to the lives of people with dwarfism is not to say that such portrayals would have been inconsequential to them. Cultural associations between dwarfism and entertainment may have begun to have a detrimental social impact on the lives of people with dwarfism during the medieval period, as indicated by an example given by Metzler (91) of a mid-fifteenth-century accommodation made by the University of Oxford to give two students with dwarfism greater privacy. The degree of this detrimental impact is, however, difficult to determine. Even in a modern context, Shakespeare (2014, 50–51) writes that there is an extensive debate about the effects of culture on society and the full impact of cultural representations therefore remain to be proven.

Short and Supernatural Dvergar in Medieval Sagas and Beyond

The description “syllt í neðan” [cleft, split or notched in the lower part] seen in Flateyjarbók’s description of Túta is also used to describe the rock-dwelling dvergr Asper in *Gibbons saga*. Asper is introduced with the words “kemur fram vr skoginum einn duergr furdv líkr sialfum fiandanum ath yfir liti og sylltt j nedan” [From the forest comes a dvergr, with a strange resemblance to the devil himself and syllt in the lower part] (*Gibbons saga* 19).

Gibbons saga is a very different type of late medieval narrative to *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*. It belongs to the “Icelandic romances” sub-genre of romance sagas—narratives composed in Iceland from the fourteenth century onwards that drew inspiration from both translated chivalric romances and the legendary sagas (Mundal 10, see also Kalinke 2005). The fifteenth-century Icelandic romance *Samsons saga fagra* similarly indicates that some narrators were combining notions of difference in bone growth with supernatural qualities to characterize dvergar. In *Samsons saga fagra*, the dvergr Grelent, who lives in a stone and possesses great craftsmanship skills, pleads for his life with the words “lítil fremd er þér það að brjóta í mér mín stuttu bein” [It will bring you little glory to break my short bones] (*Riddarasögur* 3:368–69).

In this final section, I explore how some dvergar belonging to a diverse category dubbed by Schäfer (2015, 369) as “saga dwarves” and by Ármann Jakobsson (2008, 184) as the dvergar of romance and folktales came to be represented as identifiable by their short, disproportionate stature in conjunction with the more mythological attributes of stone dwellings and craftsmanship. “Saga dwarves” are found in a range of texts dating from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, which have since been classed as belonging to either the “legendary saga” or the “romance saga” genres. Counted among the romance sagas are translated chivalric romances and those composed in Iceland, such as *Samsons saga fagra* and *Gibbons saga*. Short stature is by no means an identifying characteristic of all dvergar found in these works. In the legendary saga genre, dvergar are identified not by their size but rather by their stone dwellings and craftsmanship.¹⁴ There are, however, short dvergar in some legendary sagas. Their small size is sometimes implied, for example in narratives of overpowered dvergar.¹⁵ It can also be conveyed by explicit description as is the case with *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*’s Möndull.¹⁶ This same Möndull summarizes what it means to be a dvergr with the words “ek er dvergr í jörðu byggjandi, ok dvergsnáttúru hefi ek á kynstrum til lækidóms ok hagleik” [I am a dvergr living in the earth, and I have a dvergr’s nature for wonders of healing and craftsmanship] (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 2:417).

A very different understanding of a *dvergr*'s nature is found in translated chivalric romance. Notions of *dvergar* informed by the Old French *nains* of chivalric romances entered Icelandic literature through Norse translations in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and would influence the portrayal of *dvergar* in Icelandic romances. The *nains*, rendered *dvergar* in Norse translation, were intrinsically connected with a small stature (Lummer 2021a, 335; 337).¹⁷ In translation, they retain their characterization as having a smaller, distinctive appearance. While *nains* are hunchbacked or have humps, however, the *dvergar* of translated and Icelandic romance are disproportional (Schäferke 2015, 369). In two translated chivalric romances, *Erex saga* and *Ívens saga*, physical descriptions emphasize the unusual proportions of *dvergar*.¹⁸ The works are Norse renditions of Chrétien de Troyes' twelfth-century romances *Érec et Énide* and *Yvain*, preserved in much younger manuscripts. In both these narratives, the noun *dvergr* is used in the absence of any characterizations which suggest a role as a rock-dweller or a smith. I therefore interpret the term to refer to short stature or dwarfism, as it does in the Flateyjarbók description of Túta. The *Erex saga* *dvergr* is described as "ugly" (*ljótr*) on a big horse, and the *dvergr* in *Ívens saga* as "fat and puffy" (*digur ok þrutínn*) in the AM 489 and Holm 46 versions of the text (*Erex saga* 224–25; *Ívens saga* 114–115). The *dvergar* in *Erex saga* and *Ívens saga* both appear in service to a master—a knight and a *jötunn*, respectively. The fat, servile *dvergr* contrasted with military objects that are too big for him has a notable parallel in Túta, who appears to also be influenced by continental ideas about *dvergar*, status, and impairment. The question has been raised in earlier scholarship of whether the *nains* of European romance were influenced by real-life impaired court entertainers, but this has been the subject of debate (Wohlgemuth 98–99, see the discussion in Schäferke 2015, 352). Whether there was indeed a direct link between these two phenomena, both build on an understanding of humans with dwarfism as a commodity, distinguished by their physical appearance.

Lacking any basis in the lives of contemporary Icelanders with dwarfism, I contend that the short *dvergar* of romance sagas are bestowed with a distinctive appearance to solidify their *dvergr* identity further. In Icelandic romance, their appearance can function to cast them in the role of supernatural other. The role played by association with the supernatural in stigmatizing representations is well established (Goffman 5). In a development which would continue into the age of folklore collection, narrators emphasize specific physical attributes—in particular, short stature, a large head, and girth—to establish a supernatural *dvergr* identity. An example is found in *Sigurðar saga þöglu*, for which the main manuscript is from the sixteenth century, while the oldest dates from the fourteenth century. There, the disguise of a *dvergr* is described as entailing "lagum líjkamsvexti fotsíjdum höndum storum fotum" [short bodily stature, hands reaching down to the legs and large feet] and subsequently as "digur og

hófudmikill. enn eigi lengri enn einnar stiku har” [fat and large-headed, yet no more than a yard/two ells in height] (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances* 2:157–58; 2:205).¹⁹ In *Viktors saga ok Blávus*, preserved in manuscripts from and after the fifteenth century, the dvergr Dimus is “fotlagur ok skamhryggiadr. middigr ok miog baraxladr handsijdr ok hófudmikill” [short-legged and short-backed, stout in the waist with very prominent shoulder bones, long-armed and large-headed]” (*Late Medieval Icelandic Romances*, 1:18). The role played by the characterization of dvergar as short and disproportionate can be viewed with reference to Mitchell and Snyder’s (225) term “narrative prosthesis,” which treats disability as a “narrative device—an artistic prosthesis—that reveals the pervasive dependency of artistic, cultural, and philosophical discourses upon the powerful alterity assigned to people with disabilities.” These characterizations have in common with *Sneglu-Halla þátrr*’s Túta that they are underpinned by cultural ideas about dwarfism formulated by non-dwarfs.

An indication of the lasting influence of the physical characterizations of romance saga dvergar is encountered in the folklore collector Sigfús Sigfússon’s twentieth-century summary of dvergar, who he describes as:

Ólíkir álfum í sjón, nema að þeir eru í mannsmynd. Þeir eru sagðir skegglausir, höfuðstórir, hálsstuttir, búkmiklir og afar fótleggjalágir. Þeir eru hugnir og vitrir og snildhagastir allra jarðbúa á smíðar.

[Unlike elves in appearance, except that they have the likeness of men. They are said to be beardless, large-headed, short-necked, with large torsos and very short legs. They are thoughtful and wise and the most brilliantly skilful of all the earth-dwellers at craftsmanship.] (Sigfússon 166)

Not all dvergar in the legends collected by Sigfús, or by other folklore collectors, are described along these lines. Some are identified as dvergar only by their craftsmanship and healing abilities, such as the rock-dwellers reportedly called upon by the historical figure Guðmundur Bergþórsson (Árnason 1:453–55; Davíðsson 2:16–21) and the father of an ill child in the Hornstrandir region of the Westfjords (Bjarnason and Gíslason 3(1): 91–93) for their medicinal balms. Other dvergar legends bear similarities to those of elves and hidden people (*huldufólk*), with dvergar sometimes portrayed as stone dwellers leading parallel lives to humans, singing, worshipping, and leaving behind mittens.²⁰ Like medieval literature, the folktales give insight into how divergent, continuously evolving, ideas of the features of dvergar have lived alongside each other for (at least) the greater part of Iceland’s history.

A prospective benefit of studying some of these younger narratives further, however, is the greater availability of sources which could shine light on how narrative representations interacted with the lives and legacies of Icelanders

who, by virtue of a physical impairment or difference, were associated by others with the *dvergar* of folklore. This is seen in texts about Guðmundur Bergþórsson (1657–1705), a distinguished poet without dwarfism whose mobility was greatly impacted by a physical impairment acquired in early childhood, and Guðbjörn Helgason, who lived with restricted growth and played the *dvergur* character Rindill in the 1950 film *Síðasti bærinn í dalnum* [The Last Farm in the Valley]. Guðmundur Bergþórsson is described in folk legend as having unsuccessfully sought a cure for his impairment from a *dvergur* (Bower 2022). In Jón Espólín's (92) history of Iceland, his erroneous description of Guðmundur as “*dvergr á vöxt, nema at höfðinu*” (a dwarf in stature, except for the head), bears resemblance to medieval characterizations of *dvergar*. While Guðmundur's incorrect characterization as a dwarf likely stems from widespread knowledge of both his physical impairment and his association with *dvergar* legends, Guðbjörn Helgason, by contrast, is depicted as a folkloric character by virtue of his restricted growth, caused by childhood rickets. Prior to his acting role, Guðbjörn had tried to work in the textile industry, but was denied opportunities due to his height (“*Litli og stóri – –*,” 5). A newspaper article published after Guðbjörn's death, entitled “*Síðasti bærinn í dalnum*” (34), employs fairytale language to report on the decline of his childhood farm, Unaðsdalur. Starting with the rhetorical question “Where is the protective hand of Rindill and the hidden woman now?”, it then summarizes that “now Guðbjörn is gone, the valley uninhabited and trolls abound.” This characterization of Guðbjörn's connection with the farm provides a stark reminder of the influence that metanarratives can exert over how people's histories are constructed and reconstructed. Bolt (2019, 342) defines the metanarrative of disability, which, in this case, entails the association of dwarfism with supernatural land-dwellers, as “the cloud of a story under which those of us who have impairments often find ourselves, an overriding narrative that seems to displace agency.”

Conclusion

From the earliest written sources to the twentieth century, divergent ideas about what it means to be a *dvergr* have been in circulation in Iceland. A proportion of *dvergar* narratives, of which the oldest is found in the thirteenth-century Morkinskinna version of *Sneglu-Halla þátttr*, link *dvergar* to a short and often disproportionate stature. Meanwhile, others draw on understandings of *dvergar* with roots in mythology and legend. The greatest changes in Icelanders' perceptions of the physical shape of *dvergar* may well have taken place in the period from the settlement of Iceland in the ninth century to the thirteenth century, as sources on pre-Christian mythology written in thirteenth-century Iceland present *dvergar* as beings with an unclear, inconsistent physical form.

The notion of *dvergar* as having any physical form represents a significant development from the conception that may have existed in pre-Christian Nordic belief, if we are to build on the interpretation of the Ribe cranium as proposed by Grønvik and understand the *dvergar* of pre-Christian Scandinavia as able to dwell in abscesses.

Links between *dvergar* and dwarfism become more common in texts written from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries. A likely catalyst for this development is the use of the term *dvergr* in Old Norse translations of chivalric romances involving Old French nains—non-supernatural, servile characters intrinsically connected with a small stature. In descriptions of “saga dwarves,” some narrators—mostly of the romance saga genre—present a short and often disproportionate build as an identifying characteristic. In the sub-genre of Icelandic romances, this build is often twinned with established mythological and legendary *dvergar* characteristics, such as stone dwellings and craftsmanship. In Icelandic romances *Gibbons saga* and *Samsons saga fagra*, descriptions of stone-dwelling *dvergar* even convey differences in bone growth. A conception of supernatural *dvergar* as identifiable by a short and disproportionate build would continue to characterize some narratives into the age of organized folklore collection and indeed further, with an actor with restricted growth cast in a *dvergur* role in the 1950 folklore-inspired film *Síðasti bærinn í dalnum*. Bearing no relation to historical lives lived with dwarfism, portrayals of short *dvergar* are dependent on cultural meanings attached to dwarfism by non-dwarfs. Mitchell and Snyder (226) identify a paradox, whereby “disabled peoples’ social invisibility has occurred in the wake of their perpetual circulation throughout print history.” To my mind, this rings true when representations of dwarfism are studied in Icelandic medieval narrative, with sources on the lives lived by the people who are invoked in *dvergar* narratives much less easy to come by. That the actor cast to play a *dvergur* in *Síðasti bærinn í dalnum* was reported to have acquired his growth restriction through rickets during his childhood on a Westfjords farm provides an indication that dwarfism and restricted growth could have played a part in the lives of many historical Icelanders on a much more mundane, everyday level.

NOTES

1. I would like to express my appreciation for the support of my supervisor, Kristinn Schram. The research I conducted for my MA thesis on *dvergar* in Icelandic folklore—also written under his supervision—sparked my interest in this topic.
2. Although *Flateyjarbók* is dated to the second half of the fourteenth century, current folios 188–210—on which *Sneglu-Halla þátr* falls—are likely a fifteenth

century addition. I would like to thank Yoav Tirosh for bringing this to my attention. See also Ashman Rowe (3).

3. It is worth noting that Motz (1973–1974, 111–14) has elsewhere explored the possibility of impairment having informed notions of mythological *dvergar*, drawing on parallels with Greek mythology.
4. See Snorri Sturluson (1941, 28). Early scholar Jacob Grimm (3:129) placed a strong emphasis on the role of death in characterizations of *dvergar*. Names associated with *dvergar* such as *Nár* (translated by Larrington as corpse), *Náinn* (translated by Gould either as corpselike, or alternatively relative), and *Dáinn* (translated by Gould as deadlike), referenced in stanza 12 of *Völuspá*, also point to associations with death. Note that the latter two names are only in the Hauksbók version (*Eddukvæði* 1:294; 1:309–10). Further discussion of possible associations with death in *dvergar* names is to be found in Gould (959). See also the discussion on the limitations of Gould’s study in Battles (32).
5. Stone dwellings are mentioned in stanza three of *Alvismál* and in the prose text between stanzas four and five in *Reginismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1:438; 2:297), and in Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* (15). A *dvergr* at the opening of a stone dwelling plays an integral part of the death of the mythological king *Sveigðir*, as described in Snorri Sturluson’s *Ynglinga saga* (1941, 28), which draws on the Skaldic poem *Ynglingatal*, attributed to Þjóðólfr úr Hvíni of the late ninth or early tenth century. On the age of *Ynglingatal*, see the discussion in Krag (52–143) and McKinnell (23–25). The legend of *Sveigðir*’s disappearance into a dwarf stone is also mentioned briefly in the Latin language Norwegian chronicle *Historia Norwegie* (74–75), likely from the mid to late twelfth century. Furthermore, stanza 50 of *Völuspá* (*Eddukvæði* 1:304) makes reference to *dvergar* groaning at stone doors. On further possible references to stone dwellings of *dvergar* in *Völuspá*, see Ólafur Ólafsson (96). Reference to extraordinary objects made by *dvergar* can be found in stanza 43 of *Grímnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 1:376), and this aspect is further explored in Snorri Sturluson’s *Gylfaginning* (2005, 36) and *Skáldskaparmál* (1998, 41). See further discussion of their role as smiths in Motz (1983, 91) and Quinn (120). Ármann Jakobsson (2005, 59) has nonetheless questioned how attractive understandings of *dvergar* as smiths would be if Eddic *dvergar* were studied in isolation, as this characteristic is much more often applied to *dvergar* in later texts.
6. On the age of the introduction, see Motz (1983, 116).
7. *Reginn*’s name appears in the *dvergatal* of *Völuspá* (*Eddukvæði* 1:294), and he is called “*Reginn dvergr*” in *Norna-Gests þáttur* (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* I, 174). In the introduction of *Reginismál*, he is endowed with the qualities of supernatural knowledge and wisdom, which have elsewhere been associated with *dvergar*. Furthermore, Quinn (120) has drawn attention to *Reginn*’s ability to create supernatural objects—a quality also commonly associated with *dvergar*.
8. *Reginn* is called “*hinn hrímkaldi* [the frost-cold] *jötunn*” in stanza 38 of *Fáfnismál* (*Eddukvæði* 2:310; *The Poetic Edda* 163). See the discussion in Motz

- (1983, 117) and Quinn (120). His brother Fáfñir is also called “hinn aldni [the old] jötunn” in stanza 29 of *Fáfñismál* (*Eddukvæði* 2:308; *The Poetic Edda* 162). Alvíss is described by Þórr in stanza 2 of *Alvíssmál* as resembling a þurs (*Eddukvæði* 1:438). See the discussion in Liberman (308). On *jötunn* and *þurs*, see e.g., Ármann Jakobsson (2006, 103) and Lummer (2021b, 63–65).
9. It is worth mentioning that in *Reginismál*, Reginn is not called a *dvergr*, and his named female family members Lyngheiðr and Lofnheiðr set him apart from other *dvergar*, whose family members are commonly identified only as *dyrgjgr* [female *dvergar*] or *dvergsbörn* [children of *dvergar*].
 10. Gunnell (2001, 20–22) has connected this myth to the role of so-called *dvergar* in architecture.
 11. See explanation in Pritchard (2023, 4).
 12. See also Ármann Jakobsson (2009).
 13. This translation is my own, as are all subsequent translations unless stated otherwise.
 14. In *Egils saga einhenda*, *Áns saga bogsvægis*, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, and *Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns*, all preserved in manuscripts dating from 1400 onwards, *dvergar* are introduced only by the word *dvergr* coupled with an association with their stone (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 1:404–405; 2:195; 3:174; 3:400–401). In *Sörla þátrr*, preserved in the fourteenth-century *Flateyjarbók*, and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, preserved in fifteenth-century manuscripts, *dvergar* are identified as such by craftsmanship and healing abilities (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 2:97; 2:417).
 15. See *Áns saga bogsvægis* and *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* 1:404–405; 2:409). On the overpowering of *dvergar*, see Schäfke (2012).
 16. Mëndull is described as short, fat, and attractive with protruding eyes, and “mjök riðvaxinn” [very broad-shouldered and short-necked] (Cleasby and Vigfússon 497). On Mëndull’s stature, see Ármann Jakobsson (2008, 188) and Richards (51–52).
 17. Lummer (2021a) has studied the translation of this concept and argues that the two divergent conceptualizations competed.
 18. On the age of these sagas, see Bornholdt and Kalinke (2011).
 19. *Stika* can be translated as a yard or yardstick, or two *álnir* [ells] in old measurements. The translation proposed in the English summary of Agnete Loth’s edition is two ells, although this is accompanied by a question mark. English translations from texts in *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances* are based on the English summaries in *LMIR* where they are available.
 20. *Dvergar* are pious in the legend “*Dvergasteinn*” (*Árnason* 2:72; Sigfússon 170–71). Egeler (12) notes that Christian stone-dwelling beings are represented in *álfar* and *huldufólk* legends from the same era. Beautiful voices are heard singing psalms from stones in two of Sigfús Sigfússon’s (167–70) *dvergar* legends, “*Dverghamrar*” and “*Söngsteininn*,” and a tiny mitten is found in his

“Dvergabýli.” An example of an álfar legend of left-behind clothes is in Þorsteinn Erlingsson’s *Íslenskar sögur og sagnir* (65–66). Other dvergar legends with similarities to álfar legends are “Dvergur í Dvergasteini” (Bjarnason and Gíslason 2(1):176–78) and “Dvergálfur í Stóra-steini” (Sigfússon 171–73). Jón Árnason (1:75–76) records the same narrative as Sigfússon’s “Dvergálfur í Stóra-steini” among the álfar legends.

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