

# Memory of Iron

## Object Rhetoric and Collective Memory in *Laxdæla saga*

WILLIAM BIEL

**ABSTRACT:** This article proposes the term “object rhetoric” to describe the extralinguistic capacity of material things to create meaning in the human mind. This kind of rhetoric also challenges the concepts of subject and object, or more specifically personhood and objecthood. The article explores the social utility of object rhetoric for structuring collective memory in medieval Iceland by studying the named weapons of *Laxdæla saga*. The first section examines several texts’ depiction of the sword Sköfnungr to illustrate how it possesses both personhood and objecthood simultaneously. The second section situates Sköfnungr as one of five named weapons in *Laxdæla saga*. The saga makes coherent rhetorical use of these objects to reshape Icelandic collective memory and thus sense of self in the face of the Norwegian annexation and other social changes in the thirteenth century.

**RÉSUMÉ :** Cet article propose le terme « rhétorique de l’objet » pour décrire la capacité extralinguistique des choses matérielles à créer du sens dans l’esprit humain. Ce type de rhétorique remet également en question les concepts de sujet et d’objet, ou plus précisément le statut de personne et d’objet. L’article explore l’utilité sociale de la rhétorique de l’objet pour structurer la mémoire collective en Islande médiévale en étudiant les armes nommées de la *saga Laxdæla*. La première section examine la représentation de l’épée Sköfnungr dans plusieurs textes pour illustrer la façon dont celle-ci possède simultanément le statut de personne et d’objet. La deuxième section situe Sköfnungr comme l’une des cinq armes nommées de la *saga Laxdæla*. La saga fait un usage rhétorique cohérent de ces objets pour remodeler la mémoire collective islandaise et donc le sens de soi face à l’annexion norvégienne et à d’autres changements sociaux survenus au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.

William Biel is a PhD candidate in Medieval Studies at the University of Connecticut, USA.

## Introduction

**L***axdæla saga* concludes as Gellir Þorkelsson, the youngest son of Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir who has now grown to an old man, goes on pilgrimage to Rome. On Gellir's return northward, he takes ill off the coast of Denmark, subsequently dies, and is buried in the town of Roskilde. Only after Gellir's journey and death does the saga add that he had carried his inherited sword, Sköfnungr, with him throughout the pilgrimage. The saga says, "Gellir hafði haft Sköfnungr með sér, ok náðisk hann ekki síðan; en hann hafði verit tekinn ór haugi Hrólfs kraka" [Gellir had Sköfnungr with him, and it was never recovered again; it had been taken from the burial mound of Hrólfr kraki] (*Laxdæla saga* 229).<sup>1</sup> Then, after briefly noting how the news of Gellir's death came back to Iceland, *Laxdæla saga* ends.

The saga's focus on Gellir at its conclusion suggests his importance as a historical figure. Yet, in this brief but meaningful aside about the sword, the saga turns its focus away from the embodied human, Gellir, to the object, Sköfnungr. This passage also recalls the legendary Skjoldung dynasty by explicitly naming Hrólfr kraki, the most famous of the Skjoldung kings. Hrólfr is said to have ruled and been buried in Lejre, a royal centre from pre-Christian times. Later, in the Middle Ages, the royal power of Lejre was superseded by the episcopal power of the younger town, Roskilde. The saga does not explain these geographical, historical, and religious relations between Lejre and Roskilde, implying the audience was expected to be familiar with them. The saga audience would therefore understand that Sköfnungr's second burial is a reunification of object with person, while at the same time the passage is a reminder of how much the world changed since Sköfnungr had been separated from Hrólfr.

Though the reburial is described textually, that is, through language, the narration itself is terse and sparing. To understand the passage, the audience must call upon their own extra-textual memory of the relation between the people, things, and places to which the saga here refers. Signifier and signified always go hand-in-hand, but here the signified has the stronger grip. Though language activates and coordinates the audience's memories, meaning-making happens extralinguistically by remembering the referred-to things themselves. Sköfnungr serves an example of the nonlinguistic capacity of *things* to convey symbolic meaning through their movement and use, a process I term "object rhetoric." Reading *Laxdæla saga* through the lens of object rhetoric reveals how nonhuman things have the power to shape collective memory. This is the case for objects that are physically present to an audience, like an actor's prop, but object rhetoric also works even when the thing referred to is absent or imaginary, like Sköfnungr in *Laxdæla saga*.

Sköfnungr's example also shows that object rhetoric works through association and metonymy. Sköfnungr sits amidst a network of relations: between people such as Gellir and Hrólfr, between places such as Lejre and Roskilde, and between beliefs such as paganism and Christianity. Likewise, Sköfnungr is just one node in a network of named objects, specifically named weapons, which appear across *Laxdæla saga*. The relationships of each object with certain persons, places, or events are meaningful, but so are the relationships between the objects themselves. Object rhetoric, then, describes not only the textual deployment of specific objects but also the careful arrangement of these relationships into a meaningful pattern. Object rhetoric refers to thinking with objects in an associative and metonymic way, which calls upon collective memory while also giving it a socially useful structure.

*Laxdæla saga* not only provides a sophisticated case study of object rhetoric in the *Íslendingasögur* (also known as the Sagas of the Early Icelanders or Family Sagas), but also demonstrates how object rhetoric can be socially useful. *Laxdæla saga* was likely compiled in the mid-thirteenth century, around the end of the Sturlung Age and near to the Norwegian annexation of Iceland, whether slightly before or after. Approaching the text through object rhetoric highlights how the saga could help medieval Icelanders reorganize their collective memory to make sense of a new political reality emerging after the end of the Commonwealth.

Given this context, it seems noteworthy that three of the five named weapons are called "Konungsnautr" [King's Trophy], an appellation that denotes an object given by a king to someone who, nominally, serves them. In *Laxdæla saga*, all these nominal servants are Icelanders. It must be noted here that scholars have previously debated whether this compound should be considered a common or proper noun (konungsnautr vs. Konungsnautr), which is of course directly consequential to their value as evidence in this article. Recently, however, Lisbeth Torfing has persuasively argued that in the *fornaldarsögur* (also called the Legendary Sagas), the term serves all the linguistic and social functions of a proper noun (Torfing 2015). Though Torfing glances at the *Íslendingasögur*, she does not draw conclusions about the term's use here. For reasons that will be discussed below, I believe the same criteria she applies to the *fornaldarsögur* obtain in *Laxdæla saga*, too. I therefore take the objects in the text called Konungsnautr as named weapons.

The other two named weapons, Sköfnungr and Fótþítr [Leg-biter], also come to Icelanders from foreign rulers, the aforementioned Hrólfr kraki and, in Fótþítr's case, Earl Hákon hinn ríki [the Powerful], who the sagas remember as a kind of usurper to the Norwegian throne. These two weapons, then, also descend from royal figures, though their names do not mark the relationship as overtly. Other factors adhere as well, such as Hrólfr kraki and Earl Hákon being pagans, though the former lived in the legendary *fornöld* [ancient times] before Christianity was known in Scandinavia while the other actively opposed the conversion of Norway.

The swords, then, give concrete form to the political, religious, and historical relationships that defined medieval Icelandic society. The sword is a political thing, and object rhetoric illuminates how talking about swords can easily slip into political commentary. Understanding Sköfnungr's role in the conclusion of *Laxdæla saga* thus requires studying the relations created across a whole network of named weapons throughout the text, the centre of which I take to be the three successive objects called Konungsnautr.

The arrangement of this network around those three weapons seems a highly literary achievement, but one based on older, oral traditions. Evidence for these traditions comes from the attestations of Sköfnungr beyond *Laxdæla saga*. The relics of this oral tradition about the famous sword hint at how it provided socially useful structures to Icelandic collective memory earlier in the Commonwealth period. I take the broader Sköfnungr tradition as part of the material that is reworked in the literate context of *Laxdæla saga*. The saga's treatment of the named weapons is therefore a reshaping of inherited material, undertaken within an identifiable historical context for specific political aims. Starting with the wider Sköfnungr tradition gives context for understanding the social utility of *Laxdæla saga*'s reworking of collective memory.

### “Náttúra Sverðsins”

Sköfnungr is attested in a number of Old Norse-Icelandic texts, including *Landnámabók*, *Kormáks saga*, and *Laxdæla saga*, which treat the sword in similar but not identical fashions. This likely reflects a sustained general awareness of and interest in the sword in Iceland's oral culture over the course of centuries. Other famous objects from the sagas are mentioned in the physical possession of Commonwealth Age Icelanders; for example, Gísli Súrsson's spear, Grásiða, which was claimed to be in the hands of Sturla Sighvatsson in the thirteenth century (Kristinsson 10–11). Yet there is no indication Sköfnungr was thought to be similarly present on the island, especially for audiences familiar with the conclusion of *Laxdæla saga* wherein Gellir takes the sword with him to the grave. It would be quite possible for medieval Icelanders to think of Sköfnungr as a materially real object that had been historically present in Iceland, but now was irrevocably gone. That is to say, Sköfnungr can be considered as a material object retained in collective memory that could not be referred to immediately at hand. This makes it unlike many objects dealt with in memory studies whose function is to reinforce memory precisely by their physical presence. A well-known example of such prop-like objects would be those knives and sword hilts attached to charters in England, as described by Michael T. Clanchy (38–45), but the reference to Grásiða already mentioned provides a local instance as well.

Instead, Sköfnungr is more like an historical person in the sagas who is presumed to have physically lived but can in no way be sensibly present before

the audience. Other scholars have studied how memory can be shaped around imagined objects, but have not focused on how those things' imagined materiality proves "good to think with" (Carruthers; Hermann; Lévi-Strauss). Going further still, in collective memory the very categories of subject and object might become unstable. A number of Sköfnungr's textual appearances, which, as said before, presumably reflect oral traditions (Gísli Sigurðsson 123–28), explicitly transgress this ontological boundary. The description of Sköfnungr in *Kormáks saga* best illustrates this point. When the titular skald asks Miðfjarðar-Skeggi to loan him the sword for an upcoming duel, Skeggi says to Kormákr, "Sköfnungr er tómlátr, en þú ert óðlátr ok óðlundaðr" [Sköfnungr is slow and you are rash and impulsive] (*Kormáks saga* 235). Skeggi treats the embodied human and the object as equally capable of personality. Skeggi rightly believes Kormákr is incapable of giving the object the respect it deserves and that this will prove a source of conflict, just as between countless human characters across the sagas.

Michelle Warren has written about the "liminal ontology" possessed by swords, how "the lethal weapon completes the heroic body," which invites the practice of naming and thus "classifies social information [that] assimilate objects to the social logic of humans" (Warren 17–18). This gives the object "the effects of personhood and an implied potential for subjectivity," which "together furnish the potential for the object's autonomy and its ability to acquire a reputation independently from the hero who handles it" (Warren 17). When an object like Sköfnungr is recalled in memory—when the imagination is free to work on an otherwise absent thing—the sword can shift from being "part of the warrior's biography" to having its own kind of life in a "biography of things" (Warren 18). Jane Bennett similarly describes how despite metal often seeming the most inanimate of matter, its physical polycrystalline construction with a constant free flow of electrons makes the substance surprisingly lively—something she finds metalworkers discovered long before scientists (58–60). Following the work of Lotte Motz, it can be assumed medieval Icelandic smiths and elites who routinely crafted and owned objects like swords, even if only for show, would be familiar with this metallic vitality. Bennett continues that this dynamism constitutes what she calls "a life of metal," which like any "life of men" also results from recalling a series of discrete events coupled with the implied continual existence of an entity between those moments (Bennett 54).

The physical properties of metal as well as the social circumstances of a weapon's use both lend themselves to thinking of *something* like Sköfnungr as one would think of *someone* like Kormákr. They both have a life in collective memory, troubling what it means to be a person or an object at all. Sköfnungr not only has a characteristic attitude, but a will of its own. While preparing for the duel, Kormákr breaks the rules he has been told to follow. Thus, at first, Sköfnungr cannot be drawn from its scabbard; and when it finally does budge, the sword dramatically "gekk grenjanda ór slíðrum" [came out of the sheath

screaming] (*Kormáks saga* 236). By not respecting Skoþnunar's rules as Skeggi explained, Kormákr objectifies the object; and the object objects. A capacity to resist objectification strongly implies subjectivity, and yet Skoþnunar does not cease also being an object.

Subjectivity and objectivity, or rather personhood and objecthood, are not necessarily absolute and mutually opposed binary categories in medieval Icelandic culture. Skoþnunar can be both simultaneously. This is not to say "person" and "object" are useless terms, but rather that they are socially constructed and the designation of any entity as one or the other is a matter of rhetoric. The same principle can be observed regarding embodied human characters, like Melkorka, who is simultaneously Óláfr pái's [peacock's] "ambátt" [slave woman] and an Irish princess. Like any slave-holding society, in medieval Iceland living humans found themselves sorted across the divide between subject and object by social powers greater than any individual self and according to cultural, economic, and legal logics rather than some neutral ontological assessment (Karras). As Warren's phrase above implies, personality can be seen as a set of "effects" and functions that might be recognized in, or denied to, human and non-human bodies alike.

Regardless of an entity's physical composition and form, collective memory can only ever create a representation of matter. The contents of memory have a semiotic existence with bodies made of words and images. Recalling or attributing physical properties to such entities, or conceptualizing them as objects at all, generally serves rhetorical purposes. This is not quite the same as recognizing how objects can be symbolic, or what for clarity might be called allegorical objects. The fine adornments Guðrún dreams of as a young girl fall into this latter category (*Laxdæla saga* 89–90). When she tells her dreams to Gestr Oddleifsson, the physical aspects of each object have a one-to-one relation to some aspect of an embodied human, specifically each of Guðrún's future husbands. The objects are riddles intended to have a single, correct answer (Jakobsson 2007). In contrast, Skoþnunar does not stand as a cipher for a single concept; rather, the properties any given account chooses to remember about or give to the sword are grounded in thinking of the weapon as tangibly material. Both *Laxdæla saga* and *Kormáks saga* emphasize its tangibility in their nearly identical descriptions of its strange powers.

Both *Kormáks saga* and *Laxdæla saga* tell respectively how Kormákr and Þorkell go to Miðfjarðar-Skeggi or his son, Eiðr, to ask for the sword to settle some upcoming trouble. In both cases, Skeggi or Eiðr tells the recipient about Skoþnunar's unusual properties, which include what the sword is capable of as well as how to care for the object. In *Kormáks saga*, Skeggi tells Kormákr:

“pungur fylgir [Skoþnunar], ok skaltu hann kyrran láta; eigi skal sól skína á it efra hjaltit, eigi skaltu ok bera þat nema þú búisk til vígs; en ef þú kemr á vettvang, sit

einn saman ok bregð þar, rétt fram brandinn ok blás á; þá mun skríða yrmlingr undan hjaltinu, halla sverðinu ok ger honum hægt at skríða undir hjaltit.”  
(*Kormáks saga* 235)

[“A pouch accompanies [Sköfnungr] and you should leave that alone. You should not let the sun shine on it above the hilt, and you should not draw it except to prepare for combat. If you come to a battlefield, sit alone and draw it and blow along the blade. A small serpent will crawl from the hilt. Tilt the sword and make it possible for it to crawl under the hilt.”]

Whereas in the corresponding passage from *Laxdæla saga* Eiðr tells Þorkell:

“sú er náttúra sverðsins, at eigi skal sól skína á hjöltin, ok honum skal eigi bregða, svá at konur sé hjá. Ef maðr fær sár af sverðinu, þá má þat sár eigi græða, nema lyfsteinn sá sé riðinn við, er þar fylgir.”  
(*Laxdæla saga* 172)

[“That is the nature of the sword, that the sun should not shine on the hilt, and it should not be drawn if women are nearby. If a man receives a wound from the sword, then that wound will not heal except if the healing stone which accompanies it is used.”]

Though the differences between the passages might be further investigated, here it is important to note the consistency between the two. The closest correspondence between the passages is the prohibition against letting the sun shine on Sköfnungr, whether on the blade or hilt. This seems to reflect an old folk belief, based on at least one similar forbiddance carved on a Norwegian runestone (Grønvik). Other similarities include the “pungur” [pouch] and “lyfsteinn” [healing stone] that “fylgir” [accompanies] the blade, though Kormákr is told to leave this alone whereas Þorkell is instructed that he might heal the wounds caused by the sword with it.

The other qualities of the sword are more dissimilar, but certain patterns can still be discerned. In *Kormáks saga*, the sword should only be drawn for battle and with strict observation of a certain ritual. The rule in *Laxdæla saga* stipulates the sword should not be drawn in the presence of women. Both descriptions circumscribe the conditions under which the sword should be drawn, so that merely brandishing it becomes a rather marked occasion. There also appears to be a shared belief the sword leaves toxic or otherwise necrotic wounds. It seems safe to assume the pouch and healing stone accompanying the sword in both texts were understood by the audience as the same object and fulfilling the same purpose: healing the damage done by the weapon. The “yrmlingr” [small serpent] which appears on the blade in *Kormáks saga* may connote the blade is somehow poisonous. *Laxdæla saga* is more vague about why “má þat sár eigi græða” [the

wounds will not heal], “nema lyfsteinn sá sé riðinn við” [except by the power of the healing stone], but the underlying concept is not far from that expressed in *Kormáks saga*.

Whatever cultural significance these extraordinary properties may have implied for a medieval audience, what can be seen here is that they were sustained in collective memory by thinking of Skoþnungr as a material object rather than as an allegory for some other person or thing. By maintaining a tradition concerned with the sword’s properties rather than their significance, each new member of the memorial community could encounter those details and come to their own individual understanding of them, or simply regard them as wholly alien and inscrutable. Again, Skoþnungr has the effects of both objecthood and personhood simultaneously as additive rather than contrasting properties, each useful to collective memory in its own way. So far, mostly descriptions of Skoþnungr have been studied, offering a static view of the play between objecthood and personhood. But other effects of both categories are revealed when considering Skoþnungr across a narrative arc. Of the texts considered here, *Laxdæla saga* gives the most complex narrative involving the sword; but its account needs to be read in light of the tradition recorded in *Landnámabók*.

The various redactions of *Landnámabók* differ only slightly in their treatment of the Skoþnungr episode, the longest being as follows:

Hann [Skeggi] var hlutaðr til at brjóta haug Hrólfs kraka, ok tók hann þar ór Skoþnung, sverð Hrólfs, ok øxi Hjalta ok mikit fé annat, en hann náði eigi Laufa, því at Boðvarr vildi at honum, en Hrólfr konungr varði. Hann fór til Íslands síðan ok bjó at Reykum í Miðfirði.  
(*Landnámabók* 212)

[It so happened that Skeggi broke into the grave mound of Hrólfr kraki, and took away from there Skoþnungr, Hrólfr’s sword, and the axe of Hjalta and much other wealth as well, but he did not get Laufi, because Boðvarr did not wish it and King Hrólfr defended it [the mound]. He travelled to Iceland after and lived at Reykir in Miðfjörður.]

This passage gives an origin story to man and sword alike, so that Skoþnungr effectively joins Skeggi as one of the first settlers of Iceland. Skeggi profits from the sword much more than Kormákr does, later, and so this passage offers an example of what Vilhelm Grønbech calls the “sejrsværdet” [sword of victory], which ensures the “heil” [luck] not only of the hero but “de og de menneskers lykke, deres sjæl” [the luck of them and of those people, their soul] (Grønbech 1909b, 25–27). Skoþnungr’s *heill* is not distinct from Hrólfr’s, giving further evidence of the permeable boundary between personhood and objecthood. Grønbech says one man taking another man’s weapons might not immediately bring the new

owner heill. He writes “[b]etingelsen for at bruge en anden mands våben var da den, at man enten havde snildhed nok til at gøre dets sjæl til sin ven eller kræfter nok til at tvinge den” [the requirement to use another man’s weapon was thus that one either had enough wisdom to make its soul his friend or strength enough to coerce it] (Grønbech 1909b, 26). The object has a soul, then, which any new owner must contend with. At the same time, though, if that new owner should be “overrasket ved en pludselig egensindighed i klenodiet, en dunkel vilje der gik på tværs af ens egen; det var de tidligere ejere der pludselig dukkede op og gjorde sig bemærkede” [surprised by a sudden stubbornness in the treasure, a dark will that goes against one’s own — that was the previous owners who suddenly appeared and made themselves known] (Grønbech 1909b, 26). So the object has its own soul, but its soul is compounded with its former owner’s. Skeggi warns Kormákr of this when he loans out the sword, but Skeggi is not the source of the weapon’s stubbornness. Sköfnungr’s soul is marked by its first owner, Hrólfr kraki, but Hrólfr was known more for generosity than for being cantankerous. It is as if Sköfnungr remembers Hrólfr and judges Kormákr against that memory and finds him wanting. But the grip of each man on the blade nonetheless entwines their lives together across time and space.

The object’s personhood promiscuously mingles with its owners, now this one and now that one, here and there depending on the circumstances. Grønbech writes of this tension “derfor er det man ved overrækkelsen fortalte sværdets eller halsringens historie: man lod modtageren vide hvilken skat han fik, hvilken ære og lykke der var ophobet i den, men også hvad natur den havde, hvilken vilje der sad i den” [therefore the history of the sword or necklace was told when it was given: one told the recipient what kind of treasure he got, what honour or luck was accumulated in it, but also what nature it had, what kind of will was in it] (Grønbech 1909b, 27). The sword contains history in its blade and a certain community between all who encounter it, whether directly or indirectly. In this way, the sword also represents the new Icelandic society itself and shapes that society’s sense of its own place in the world. Skeggi’s barrow breaking joins the past to the present and the island to the continent. Sköfnungr acts metonymically rather than allegorically. The sword also stands metonymically for Hrólfr himself, and for the concept of the high honour of ancient heroes. The way Skeggi gets it implies where he stands in relation to Hrólfr and his champions. Hrólfr is such a strong warrior here that he continues to “varða” [guard] his treasures, like Bøðvarr who can still “vilja” [(not) want] Skeggi to succeed. Hrólfr and Bøðvarr here seem to fight together, as they did in life, limiting Skeggi’s success by keeping the sword Laufi out of his grasp.

These heroes’ might has not diminished over the ages. Were Hrólfr a lifeless corpse, Skeggi’s grave robbing would not be such a daring feat and would accrue less honour. Because Hrólfr remains at the height of his power, Skeggi gains that much more honour for himself by wresting Sköfnungr from him. Sköfnungr is

thereafter strongly associated with Skeggi, unlike any other treasure he gets from the barrow. Hjalti's axe, for example, is never mentioned in relation to Skeggi in any other text. Yet Skeggi cannot get Laufi from Þoðvarr, Hrólfr's greatest warrior. Skeggi's mixed success at getting the weapons of Hrólfr's champions puts Skeggi somewhere in their ranks among Hjalti and Þoðvarr, a worthy companion of the famed men. Sköfnungr, kept from then on as a treasure, draws a line connecting Skeggi to Hrólfr and lets the Icelandic settler boast of his likeness to the champions of bygone days. Skeggi becomes a synecdoche for the fledgling Icelandic society, too, suggesting the things the settlers carry to the new land are what bear forth their high lineages from the old homes. The Settlement Age becomes contiguous with and successor to the fornöld through Sköfnungr.

Sköfnungr accrues metonymic relations with intangible, impersonal concepts like the fornöld and Settlement Age, but most of its associations are with people. *Landnámabók* only mentions Hrólfr and Skeggi; but that list grows through other texts, again likely mirroring oral tradition, to include Kormákr, Eiðr Skeggjason, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, and Gellir Þorkelsson as well as people struck by the weapon like Bersi the Dueller in *Kormáks saga* and Grímr the outlaw in *Laxdæla saga*. So rather than a singular meaning that must be riddled out of the object, as with the things in Guðrún's dreams, the sword instead can accrete an unlimited number of overlapping metonymic associations to become a kind of memorial palimpsest. It is by remembering the sword as a material object rather than as an allegorical symbol that all these potential metonymies remain accessible to future generations.

When the overwhelming majority of these metonymies are between persons, it is all the less surprising that Sköfnungr should take on a life of its own. As *Kormák saga* makes clear, medieval Icelanders may not have perceived Sköfnungr as merely being subject to many persons' ownership, but rather as a subject itself. One way to account for this is by recognizing Sköfnungr as a site of distributive personhood (Bennett; Latour). Returning to the concept of personhood as a series of effects, those effects are produced through social relationships. Sköfnungr proves as capable of participating in such relationships as any embodied human. Personhood is not then something that inheres within an entity but instead has unclear boundaries distributed across multiple entities living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. This distribution need not even centre on a living human body, and Sköfnungr gains its own personhood by sitting in the midst of many other social relations. Yet as an object, Sköfnungr can form different kinds of social relationships than an embodied human. Keeping an eye on the sword as the centre of its own biography, according to Warren, this life "begins with forging" and may go on to include "inscription, hilding, baptism, naming, bloodstains, envenoming, relic storage, breakage, gifting, refitting, sale, burial, drowning, and theft" (Warren 17–18). Sköfnungr itself can boast of experiencing

a good number of the events listed here, all of which are ultimately social in nature but many of which are unlike what a human is likely to go through.

As Warren lists them, the events of such a life comprise a series of transitive verbs, revealing these social relations are not static lines but rather dynamic vectors, in Brian Massumi's term, with various kinds of force originating in some entity and moving toward and through others. That transitory capacity belongs more fully to material objects than to allegorical ones. The things in Guðrún's dreams fall, break, disappear, and so on, but they do not transfer from one person to another. They predict other relations that have yet to come into material being. But a physical object, even when only remembered as such, can record relations as they materially unfold through time, which Lisbeth Torfing admirably demonstrates. This is especially true with named objects, and never more so than for objects with names that are compound nouns ending with the suffix *-nautr*, [trophy] (2015, 45). Torfing describes such an object as "ting, der stâr for forhold" [a thing that stands for a relation] (2015, 33). Its status as a proper noun is analogous to that of patronymics and matronymics, which are likewise proper compound nouns in which the first element refers to a foregoing person and the second element implies a social relationship with a subsequent person, i.e., *-son* or *-dóttir* [-son or -daughter] (2015, 47–48).

The suffix *-nautr*, though, applies to objects that have undergone a change of ownership in social contexts, which make the relation between the previous and subsequent owners lastingly meaningful. Something bought from a passing merchant does not count, because the transfer of money discharges any lasting social significance to the relationship. The term is generally reserved for gifts, or spoils forcibly taken (Torfing 2015, 37). These kinds of objects represent "en helt specifik udvekslingsrelation" [a very specific relationship of exchange] wherein "en bevægelse af specifikke ydelser eller produkter i endtydig retning er kendetegnende, eventuelt med en underforståelse af en modydelse af anden type" [a movement of specific services or products in an unambiguous direction, possibly with other kinds of reciprocity implied] (2015, 43). The transfer of the object needs to be "i entydig retning" [in an unambiguous direction] and follow "kendetegnende" [characteristic] norms. The exchange has to occur in a socially recognizable form in order to produce a set of obligations that bind two or more people together.

Torfing's research is on the *fornaldarsögur*, and she is careful to point out her observations "kan ikke umiddelbart overføres til andre tekstgrupper, hvor fx *konungsnautr* [sic] i konge- og íslændingesagær ikke lever op til det" [cannot immediately be transferred to other groups of text, where for example *Konungsnautr* in *Konungasögur* [Kings' Sagas] and *Íslendingasögur* does not match [this pattern]] (2015, 37). But her qualification has to do with the trend in the *fornaldarsögur* by which an object with a *-nautr* name is transferred violently between men. In the *Konungasögur* and *Íslendingasögur*, *Konungsnautr* objects

are exclusively given as gifts, so far as I know. In spite of this difference in narrative pattern, the Konungsnautr weapons in *Laxdæla saga* still fit Torfing's model because they are given in socially recognizable forms from a king to an Icelander whom the king expects to yield service in return. Torfing's line of thought comes near to Grønbech's, who in writing about the Íslendingasögur specifically says that "[g]laven er en social factor. Idet den går fra mand til mand og til mand igen, gennemtrækker den samfundet med et netværk af forpligtelser, så stærkt at man bevæger hele staten hvis man blot får ret tag på et eller andet punkt af kæden" [the gift is a social factor. When it goes from man to man and to man again, it pulls on the community with a whole network of obligations, so strong that a man moves the whole state if he just gets the right hold on one or another point in the chain] (Grønbech 1909a, 13).

Objects named with *-nautr* compounds therefore record social information, about how people become bound together in sets of mutual obligations that develop over time. These obligations give identity to the people enmeshed in them, so that their personhoods do not exist independently but are co-constitutive. That distributive personhood cannot exist without the object, which by its very existence mediates a distribution of personhoods amongst physical entities. In this way, the physical object becomes a genealogical technology. As a site of distributive personhoods, Sköfnungr is like a member of a genealogical line, but as an object it is also the line itself. Sköfnungr is the thing that connects human bodies together in a network of relations, which operate independently of blood. Certain members of that network, namely Skeggi and his son Eiðr, happen to be related by blood in a traditional sense, but other members, like Þorkell and Grímr the outlaw, are related by blood in a different way: the blood spilled by Sköfnungr's blade. And blood does not factor at all in the relation between Skeggi and Kormákr. The object constructs a different kind of genealogy.

Were these vectors to be drawn, they could not be easily formatted as a traditional family tree since that would require Sköfnungr to be at its head, which is inaccurate. They could more easily be depicted as what Deleuze and Guattari call a rhizome, since Sköfnungr would not sit neatly at the head or even centre but rather as the thing that runs between all the different human members and various kinds of relations comprising the network (Deleuze and Guattari 6–7). It is not hard to imagine how a memorial culture might benefit from availing itself of this rhizomatic memorial structure alongside "arboreal" ones, both of which concepts Deleuze and Guattari already frame in genealogical terms (10–11). And if one object such as Sköfnungr can produce a framework of this nature, why not others?

## Between Blades

At this point, what has been studied is Sköfnungr's ability to shift categories, from personhood to objecthood. Before including other objects into these considerations, it is worth pausing to consider what happens in the midst of this shift. It has been shown that a category like "objecthood" is rhetorical and perceptual, and as a corollary it might be said that material entities can exist outside these modes. For now, setting aside the ephemeral phenomenon of personhood, it can be said that when a material entity is not an object it is a thing. Heidegger provides the classic example of a broken hammer, an entity which formerly complied to the category of object based on a clear understanding of how embodied humans might materially relate to it: a hammer hammers. When it breaks, the hammer can no longer hammer and so ceases to be a hammer. It is an ex-hammer, with no clear function or even identity other than what it used to be but is not now. The perceiving human has trouble discerning from the resulting fragments what relation they, the person, might have to these new multiple material entities. So not only is the hammer not a hammer, it goes from being an object to being a thing (Brown). Returning to *Laxdæla saga*, this capacity applies to objects whether or not they are allegorical. When Guðrún dreams that her gold ring slips from her finger, she sees it break on a stone and blood comes out (*Laxdæla saga* 90). The ring ceases to be a ring and strange things occur, the kind of strange that dreams are made of. Yet, dreams and memory are both faculties of the mind, and what happens in one can happen in the other.

Extrapolating from this, when an object does not conform to its expected function, regardless of whether it undergoes a dramatic physical change like the hammer or ring, it momentarily becomes a thing requiring perceiving humans to renegotiate their relation to the material entity. This has social implications. Torfing also writes about objects as persistent signifiers of social relations (Torfing 2016). When perceived, an object with recognized social meaning negates the need for the perceiving humans to negotiate their own relations. In Torfing's work, objects have a socially stabilizing effect, and this can be seen in many cases from *Laxdæla saga* as well. Sköfnungr passes so unproblematically from Skeggi to his son, Eiðr, that the unremarkable event is merely implied rather than explicitly narrated in *Laxdæla saga*. Eiðr likewise passes the sword unproblematically to Þorkell. These cases stabilize social relations and thus conform to Torfing's theory. But when an object becomes a thing it can instead destabilize social relations, and such dramatic events are amenable to narrative and transmission through collective memory (Assmann). When the individual entities in such an event can synecdochally represent larger social structures, the episode is especially likely to be passed on as a way for future generations to renegotiate their own understanding of themselves.

Such “thing-power” (Bennett) is a recurring feature in *Laxdæla saga*, especially among a set of objects to which Skoþnungr belongs: named weapons. There are five of them in the saga, the three called Konungsnautr as well as Fótþítr and Skoþnungr itself. While named weapons are common across the sagas, five appearing in a single text is unusual—especially when three bear the same name. Critics have long held *Laxdæla saga* as more concerned with description of material things than most of the Íslendingasögur, but this tendency toward detail has been largely read in an allegorical mode, or as a means of characterization (Jakobsson 1998). Little attention has been given to the named weapons. Each of them comes to its Icelandic owner from a foreign ruler, though in the cases of Fótþítr and Skoþnungr the vector is especially convoluted. Following these vectors reveals the dynamic thing-power of the named weapons in *Laxdæla saga*, indicating these objects meant more to medieval audiences than modern scholars have so far realized.

The three weapons that are called Konungsnautr are owned by three succeeding generations of the Laxdælir men: Høskuldr Dala-Kolsson, Óláfr pái, and Kjartan Ólafsson. Each of these men is born a pagan and Høskuldr dies as such, but they all receive their weapons from the Christian kings of foreign countries. Each of the weapons also undergoes some event in which its behaviour does not conform to expectation, going from object to thing and forcing the man wielding it to renegotiate their own social position as a result. The only time these weapons are mentioned is when they are given and when they undergo that unexpected change, or when that change becomes relevant again. The episodes in which the weapons are given also become increasingly elaborate as the saga progresses. The thing-power of these objects includes the socially useful capacity to chart the rise and fall of the Laxdælir family, which in turn can serve as a metonymy for Icelandic society itself.

Høskuldr receives the first weapon called Konungsnautr from Hákon góði [the Good] in Norway, along with a ring that bears a similar name, Hákonarnautr [Hákon’s Trophy]. The two objects come from the same man, Hákon, to the same man, Høskuldr, but interestingly they receive different names. One may assume this is for clarity, but linguistic analysis resists such an assumption. Torfing points out there are multiple instances of collective names employing the word *-nautr*, the most prominent being the three magic arrows in *Örvar-Odds saga*, each with their own name but together called “Gusisnautar” [Gusir’s Trophies] (2015, 54). The pattern holds across a number of fornaldarsögur, implying this construction is not idiosyncratic to a single author but rather a default convention in Old Norse-Icelandic. *Laxdæla saga* presents a similar narrative context, because when Hákon gives his gifts to Høskuldr the narrator comments that together the sword and ring were valued at twelve ounces of gold (*Laxdæla saga* 25). The expected name for Hákon’s objects, then, would be the plural \*Hákonarnautar, yet the saga makes a point of naming the two objects individually and in the singular.

Discussing the *fornaldarsögur*, Torfing notes “[v]alget af forled er signifikant, idet det i sig selv sender signaler til alle” [the choice of prefix is significant, in that it in itself sends signals to everyone] about “hvilket aspekt af oprindelsen der [navnet] relateres til” [what aspect of the original owner the name is related to] (2015, 54). The twin gifts emphasize different kinds of social relationships between the two persons, one man-to-man and the other king-to-servant. The sword and ring make it impossible to securely determine whether Hákon and Hǫskuldr are equals. The objects obscure the nature of the two men’s relationship, raising the question of whether an Icelander and a king might stand on the same level. The rising fortunes of Hǫskuldr’s son, Óláfr, and grandson, Kjartan, soon suggest the answer is “yes.”

Hákon’s gifted sword and ring are also unique in that nowhere else in the saga is a named weapon given a monetary value. Neither of the objects are mentioned again until Hǫskuldr is on his deathbed and asks his legitimate sons to recognize the inheritance rights of their half-brother, Óláfr pái (*Laxdæla saga* 72). Þorleikr objects, so Hǫskuldr asks if he would refuse Óláfr being left a mere twelve ounces. Þorleikr relents, assuming his father is measuring in silver. But Hǫskuldr leaves Óláfr the sword and ring, then dies having passed his royal gifts to Óláfr but also sowing discord between his sons. Neither the weapon nor the ring is ever mentioned again.

From the perspective of a medieval Icelander, a vector of legal and religious legitimacy passes with the sword from Hákon, as the first Christian king of Norway, to Hǫskuldr and then to Óláfr, the otherwise illegitimate son who will one day father the outstanding convert, Kjartan. Although both Hǫskuldr and Óláfr are still pagan here, the saga foreshadows Kjartan’s achievement and bolsters his pedigree through the metonymic associations of the sword. However, that vector is not unproblematic because Hǫskuldr plays with thing-power to deceive his eldest son. Þorleikr assumes he knows what objects Hǫskuldr plans to give Óláfr, but he does not recognize what kinds of things Hǫskuldr’s *Konungsnautr* can be. Hǫskuldr tricks Þorleikr by not using his sword as a sword but as currency. The object becomes a thing to Þorleikr, forcing him to renegotiate his relations not only with the sword but also his family. Þorleikr makes his problem Óláfr’s problem. Þorleikr’s renegotiation of his relationship to the sword forces him and Óláfr to renegotiate their relationship as brothers. Óláfr skillfully resolves the tension, increasing his honour as a man of wisdom and moderation. Having catalyzed these social developments, Hǫskuldr’s *Konungsnautr* appears to have exhausted its value to collective memory and is out of the saga.

In time, Óláfr pái receives his own *Konungsnautr*, a spear, from his grandfather Mýrkjartan, the King of Ireland. Óláfr therefore has earned his own symbol of royal authority and not simply inherited one from his father. However, he will not have the opportunity to pass this weapon along as Hǫskuldr did, since it is destroyed when Óláfr confronts the ghost of Víga-Hrappr [Killer-Hrappr].

After a series of hauntings, Óláfr finally engages the revenant in physical combat, in which Óláfr is armed with Konungsnautr. Óláfr thrusts the spear but Hrappr “tekr höndum báðum um fal spjótsins ok snarar út af, svá at þegar brotnar skaptit” [took both hands around the shaft of the spear and twisted so that the shaft broke at once] (*Laxdæla saga* 69). Hrappr then sinks into the ground, escaping and carrying off the spearpoint with him. The next day, Óláfr goes to Hrappr’s burial site and disinters him, finding the corpse still clutching the spearhead. Óláfr burns Hrappr and scatters the ashes at sea, ending his hauntings; but his Konungsnautr is never mentioned again, presumably ruined forever.

Unlike Høskuldr, Óláfr actually uses his weapon as a weapon until Hrappr forces it to become an ex-weapon. The revenant breaks Óláfr’s spear, physically changing it and carrying away the damage-dealing part of the object so that it can no longer fulfill its intended function. The potentially homoerotic phallic symbolism is interesting but beyond the scope of this article—for now it must suffice to note this conforms to the model of Heidegger’s hammer wherein the singular object becomes multiple, separate things. The Irish adventure during which Óláfr receives his Konungsnautr marks him as the equal of any monarch (Jakobsson 1998), but that is a secular recognition. At this point, Óláfr is a pagan. Hrappr ruins the chief symbol of authority given to Óláfr, forcing a re-evaluation of Óláfr’s worth as a man. Elsewhere in the sagas, revenants are often associated with paganism, embodying a threat of the wrong kind of afterlife, which living pagans are powerless to stop but which Christians overcome (Baier and Shäfke). The thing-power unleashed at the destruction of his spear nuances the saga’s overall treatment of Óláfr pái. He may have a beautiful and powerfully able body, rich material splendour, and skill in courtesy to match any king, but he lacks spiritual fulfillment. In contrast, Kjartan will exceed his father not only in physical and secular virtues but also religious ones. This repetition of the Konungsnautr motif continues the vector that began with Høskuldr’s sword. The thing-power of Óláfr’s spear shows the rising honour of the Laxdæla family while still indicating a spiritual lack that will soon be fulfilled by the family’s greatest triumph: Kjartan himself.

The moment that Kjartan receives his Konungsnautr from Óláfr Tryggvason is narrated in more detail than for any other of the three Konungsnautrs. As the king gives him the sword, Óláfr says, “láttu þér vápn þetta fylgjusamt vera, því at ek vænti þess, at þú verðir eigi vápnbitinn maðr, ef þú berr þetta sverð” [Always have this weapon with you, since I expect, that you will never be a weapon-bitten man if you carry this sword] (*Laxdæla saga* 132). Given the pervasively religious theme characterizing Kjartan’s time with Óláfr, the king’s proclamation can easily be read as a promise of salvation to the Icelander if he will keep the missionary king’s true gift: Christianity. The passage bestows retroactive religious significance on the prior episodes in which Kjartan’s pagan ancestors receive weapons with the same name from other Christian kings. These trinitarian repetitions of the

three gifted swords suggest a typological reading in which Kjartan is now able to fulfill a spiritual potential unrealized by his forebearers.

However, the other chief gift Kjartan comes away from the king's court with is Ingibjörg's *motr* [headdress], which initiates the love-triangle-driven feud resulting in Kjartan's death. Scholars have long noted the similarity of that love triangle to the legend of Tristan and Isolde, which was one of the first romances translated by King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway's commission and presumably would have been known to Icelanders by the mid- to late-thirteenth century (*Laxdæla saga* xxviii–xxix; Kalinke 2011b, 12–14). Like the swords, a number of vectors run through the *motr*, and the tragic love triangle emerging from these vectors might call Tristan and Isolde consciously to mind for the audience. Thinking associatively, the *motr* could signify the whole genre of romance itself. Kjartan, then, brings two gifts back from Norway, Konungsnautr and the *motr*, and Kjartan finds himself caught between the vectors of each object. In this structure the audience might see a tension within Kjartan between Christianity and courtesy. That tension provides a frame for reading many of the subsequent developments in the feud. Soon thereafter amidst the growing hostility between Kjartan, Guðrún, and Bolli, Kjartan's sword is stolen and thrown unsheathed into a swamp (*Laxdæla saga* 142). The moment is significant enough that it lends the place a name, Sverðskelda [Sword Swamp]. This implies the memory of Kjartan losing Konungsnautr was powerful for subsequent generations of Icelanders, and not merely those familiar with the written text of *Laxdæla saga* but also to anyone familiar with the land itself (Lethbridge).

Although the sword is recovered, the sheathe remains missing and is never found. A servant returns the weapon to Kjartan, but he “hafði jafnan minni mætur á sverðinu síðan en áðr” [placed less value on the sword thereafter] (*Laxdæla saga* 142). Kjartan wraps the sword in a cloth and puts it away. The moment reveals there are complex ways to view the object, but Kjartan's own view is unfortunately simple. Kjartan's behaviour fits with Grønbech's model of the sword of victory. “Det var en skam,” Grønbech writes, “at miste sine våben” [it was a dishonour ... to lose one's weapon], and “[n]idingsværket for i våbene, så at frænderne førte dem med ængstelse” [the shameful deed went into the weapons, so that kinfolk wielded them with anxiety] (1909b, 30). Grønbech says this anxiety is a worry about the weapon turning against the wielder, but he also contends that human honour was tied to such treasures (1909b, 31). It is hard to imagine Kjartan being afraid here; “insulted” seems likelier. Still, Kjartan sees the loss of the sword as a personal shame. This hints that he thinks of his Konungsnautr as a sword of victory, a tool for ensuring his own honour both by its battle prowess and by its material and social worth as a treasure. From this perspective, the bond that the sword creates between Kjartan and Óláfr Tryggvason is important in part as a personal friendship, but otherwise because of the boost it gives to Kjartan's social standing. When his Konungsnautr is thrown in the swamp, that apparent disgrace

effectively breaks the object for him. At the same time, the sword is also a site of distributed personhood, like *Sköfnungr* becomes when it passes from one embodied human to the next. Before its theft, the sword is a thing in which Kjartan's personhood intermingles with Óláfr Tryggvason's. It is reasonable Kjartan would be angry over the loss of the object that facilitates that intermingling. It must be noted, though, that the theft of the sword is more an attack on Kjartan's own personhood than the king's. Kjartan renegotiates his relationship to the object by hiding it away, indicating his chief concern is the damage to his own honour, perhaps so much so that he has disregarded Óláfr's prophetic words. Kjartan responds to the sword's thing-power poorly, and consequently the hostility between himself, Guðrún, and Bolli increases. Meanwhile, Kjartan's bond with Óláfr Tryggvason weakens. When Kjartan lays aside the sword, he may also be laying aside Christianity. Hereafter, the remaining vector of his life is largely traced by the *motr*.

The sword is only mentioned once more, at the beginning of Kjartan's final battle against Bolli when the narrator says forebodingly that he "hafði eigi" [did not have] *Konungsnautr* (*Laxdæla saga* 153). Kjartan famously holds a sword of such bad iron he must repeatedly straighten it by stomping on the blade with his foot. However, Kjartan dies in the end not because of the poor quality of his war gear but because of a choice. Faced with killing his foster-brother, Kjartan says "miklu þykki mér betra at þiggja banaorð af þér, frændi, en veita þeir þat" [it seems much better to me to be killed by you, kinsman, than to give you that] (*Laxdæla saga* 154). Thus, it is not clear how the presence or absence of *Konungsnautr* would make a material difference to the outcome of the battle. The more likely reason that the saga names the weapon here is to remind the audience of its other functions, of its thing-power as a promise of Christian salvation that Kjartan goes into the battle without.

Kjartan's *Konungsnautr* is not the only named weapon in the fight, and just as there is a parallel between the foster-brothers, Kjartan and Bolli, there is a parallel between the swords they carry, *Konungsnautr* and *Fótbítr*. More pointedly, *Fótbítr* is the antithesis of *Konungsnautr* because its vector ultimately leads back to the court of Jarl Hákon Sigurðsson hinn ríki, Óláfr Tryggvason's political and religious enemy. *Fótbítr*'s provenance is the most convoluted of any object's in the saga. It is first mentioned in the ownership of a man named Geirmundr gnýr [thunder], himself a fugitive ex-follower of Jarl Hákon. Geirmundr bullies his way onto Óláfr pái's ship to flee from Norway to Iceland, then bribes Óláfr's wife, Þorgerðr Egilsdóttir, for marriage to their daughter, Þuríðr, without Þuríðr's consent (*Laxdæla saga* 79–80). Three years pass during which time Geirmundr remains with Óláfr but is uncooperative around the farm, and Þuríðr bears his child. Geirmundr then announces his plan to leave, without providing Þuríðr any support (*Laxdæla saga* 80); Óláfr and Þorgerðr do nothing to stop Geirmundr, so Þuríðr takes matters into her own hands. Þuríðr has herself rowed out to a nearby

island where Geirmundr and his crew are sleeping on their ship as they wait for a good wind. Thuird bores holes in Geirmundr's ship's rowboats to ensure her getaway by oars, then she stealthily swaps Fótbítr for the baby and leaves. Geirmundr wakes with the baby's cries, in time to call for her to bring Fótbítr back. Þuríðr refuses, so he responds "þat læt ek þá um mælt ... at þetta sverð verði þeim manni at bana í yðvarri ætt, er mestr er skaði at, ok óskapligast komi við" [then I lay this curse on it ... that this sword will be the death of that man in your family whose loss will be most damaging and who will least deserve it] (*Laxdæla saga* 82). Geirmundr sails off, but the narrator adds that his ship wrecks along the coast of Norway and all aboard drown, lending dramatic weight to his curse by effectively making them Geirmundr's last words.

There is a vector running from Hákon Sigurðsson through Geirmundr into Fótbítr and thus including Bolli. Though the saga gives Earl Hákon little narrative attention, he is infamous for his portrayal in multiple other texts as a kind of Nordic Agamemnon. During the battle of Hjörungavágr, Hákon supposedly sacrifices one of his sons to his family's ancestral pagan deity in order to conjure a storm to destroy his enemies (*Saga of the Jómsvikings* 146–47). This fantastic episode seems to have defined collective memory of Hákon in Iceland, setting him up as a religious archnemesis against the Christian Óláfr Tryggvason (*Saga of the Jómsvikings* 8–9). In isolation, *Laxdæla saga's* treatment of Hákon is neutral, but the vector running through Fótbítr is laden with negative religious connotation. The curse Geirmundr lays on the sword is typical of the kind of black magic associated with paganism (Jakobsson 2002, 152). Given the broader context of how Earl Hákon was remembered by Icelanders, Geirmundr's behaviour and apparent sorcery confirms a set of latent potential associations with Hákon and his followers as dangerous pagans. Geirmundr's dying curse imbues Fótbítr with Grønbech's "dunkel vilje" [dark will], which endures even after Þuríðr takes it from Geirmundr and he dies. Fótbítr becomes a synecdoche for Hákon Sigurðsson, the royal usurper, who is in turn a metonymy for paganism in the collective memory of later Christian communities.

In *Laxdæla saga*, then, objects facilitate the transposition of political and religious affairs from Norway to Iceland. Kjartan's and Bolli's signature weapons align their battle at Hafragil with the conflict between King Óláfr and Earl Hákon, and so between Christianity and paganism. These struggles on a grand scale are translated to Iceland through the vectors of the two swords, increasing the symbolic stakes of the Icelandic feud. The parallel between the foster-brothers and their swords suggest not only that Kjartan was doomed to face Bolli, but that Konungsnautr should have faced Fótbítr. But Kjartan stands effectively disarmed against paganism. In the escalating feud before the battle, Kjartan is driven more by the motr than the sword, and thus he is motivated by courtesy instead of Christianity. Kjartan lets himself be guided by secular values rather than religious ones, which brings him to the moment of his destruction. Fótbítr's dangerous

presence makes the fight at Hafragil into a spiritual war between salvation and damnation. By abandoning the missionary king's token, Kjartan leaves himself vulnerable to the pagan blade.

For the saga's thirteenth-century audience, the object rhetoric in *Laxdæla saga* might also call to mind the Norwegian annexation of Iceland. King Hákon Hákonarson, who brought about that annexation, is remembered for his program of secular reform among the aristocracy; again, promoted especially by translations of chivalric romances (Barnes). Though it is not known for certain how soon those translations were circulating in Iceland, all available circumstantial evidence indicates the transmission occurred quickly and that it is reasonable to assume Icelanders were familiar with the romances produced in Hákon's court by the mid-thirteenth century (Kalinke 2011a, 151–52). The divide between Christianity and courtesy posed by *Laxdæla saga* could well be read, then, as a commentary on Iceland's relationship to the Norwegian monarchy. While the missionary king, Óláfr Tryggvason, was largely celebrated in collective memory for initiating Iceland's conversion to Christianity, nonetheless in the thirteenth century the Norwegian crown was threatening to subjugate Iceland. Meanwhile, the Sturlung Age chieftains competed with one another for domestic rule in part by making themselves as king-like as possible, which apparently included adopting fashionable courtly customs (Coroban 189). Of course, the highest echelon of Icelandic ecclesiastics were allied with the archbishopric in Trondheim, itself an institution in league with the king (Karlsson 85). However, before the annexation and for a time thereafter the lower ranks of the Icelandic priesthood were still generally controlled by and consisted of members of the chieftain class (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson). Assuming these were the kinds of persons who compiled most of the *Íslendingasögur*, then it makes sense they would strive in their rhetoric to bestow a religious tone to the political issues concerning the chieftains.

The tension between the sword and *motr* can thus be read as a rhetorical engagement with contemporary political issues, and an attempt to reshape Icelandic collective memory in socially useful ways. Kjartan stands as a distillation of the highest ideals embodied by the chieftaincy, but the saga suggests they are poised at a dangerous moment between pursuing secular rather than religious values and will thus leave themselves open to sin. *Laxdæla saga* casts Iceland's political relation to Norway in a religious light through the thing-power of Kjartan's *Konungsnautr* and Bolli's *Fótbítr*. Kjartan begins his last stand having rejected the established sign promising Christian salvation, but he makes a choice at the end that turns him into a martyr. Kjartan may not physically have *Konungsnautr* with him, but he renegotiates his identity in his last moments by remembering what *Konungsnautr* stands for. In so doing, Kjartan becomes an example for Sturlung Age chieftains to embrace by rejecting the courtly fashions favourable in King Hákon's court.

The saga's rhetorical project does not end with Kjartan's death. Afterwards, Fótbitr continues to be wielded in revenge killings that become tangled up with the machinations of Snorri goði [the chieftain], and the fortunes of the Laxdælir family diminish. The saga's attention shifts back to the succession of Guðrún's husbands, as Bolli is killed and she then marries Þorkell Eyjólfsson. This is the only new husband Guðrún has after the island's conversion, and the importance of this religious context is emphasized by Gestr Oddleifsson's preceding interpretation of Guðrún's dreams early in the saga. In her dreams, the husbands who convert to Christianity are represented by objects of gold. Þorkell is specifically symbolized by a golden helmet—seemingly the most valuable of all the treasures in Guðrún's vision.

Þorkell also owns Sköfnungr, a weapon metonymically associated with paganism but in a different way than Fótbitr. The golden helmet of the dream and the tangible sword are the most prominent objects associated with Þorkell, and they suggest a tension between Christianity and paganism. The helmet is only allegorical, so it cannot have the same kind of vector as the physical weapon; resolving the tension between the helmet and the sword requires tracing Þorkell's relationship to Sköfnungr. The moment when Þorkell receives the sword from Eiðr Skeggjason has already been recounted, and the scene also marks Sköfnungr's introduction to the saga. Þorkell soon overcomes Grímr the outlaw with Sköfnungr but then saves his life by using the sword's healing stone. Þorkell helps the outlaw escape Iceland to start a new life in Norway. Later, Þorkell visits the court of Óláfr Tryggvason to get wood to bring back to Iceland to build a church, which Þorkell wants to be larger than the one that the king is building. The king scolds the Icelander for his pretensions, and when Þorkell comes back to Iceland he dies in a shipwreck in Breiðafjörður while transporting the wood home. Sköfnungr washes up on an island thereafter named Sköfnungsey [Sköfnungr's Island] (*Laxdæla saga* 222). Like Sverðskelda, the landscape becomes an extratextual witness verifying these events in collective memory. Sköfnungr is recovered and inherited by Þorkell and Guðrún's son, Gellir, who owns it the rest of his life.

Whereas the Laxdælir men, especially Óláfr pái and Kjartan, compare equally or even favourably with foreign kings, Þorkell is reprimanded for trying to compare himself in similar ways. However, Þorkell's possession of Sköfnungr connects him to a vector running back to perhaps the most legendary ancient king of all, Hrólfkraki. The Christian king's rebuke indicates the Icelander's relatively low status, but the sword's association with the pagan yet heroic king suggests a high status. Þorkell's visit to the Norwegian king also recalls Kjartan's visit, and Sköfnungr recalls especially Kjartan's sword, Konungsnautr. The similarity between the named weapons creates a vector running from the Laxdælir men to Þorkell. In a way, he becomes their successor, but his qualities are not the same as those that bring praise to the Laxdælir men.

In particular, the weapons Kjartan and Þorkell carry both have religious associations, the former with Christianity and the latter with paganism. But Sköfnungr presents a different kind of affiliation with paganism. Fótbítr suggests the looming danger of Earl Hákon, who represented paganism in fairly recent history. Sköfnungr's vector runs back to a king safely removed in the past, when paganism could be more easily excused by medieval Christians as lamentable ignorance rather than active malice. At least one manuscript of *Hrólfs saga kraka*, AM 9 fol., shows the ancient king in this more sympathetic light (Slay 6–7). There, as Hrólfr faces his final battle, an aside records the words of one Master Galterus who laments “at mannligr kraftar máttu ekki standast við slíkum fjanda krafti, utan máttar guðs hefði á móti komit” [that human strength may not withstand such devilish power, without the intervention of God's might] (*Hrólfs saga kraka*, 104). This Galterus then addresses Hrólfr directly, saying “ok stóð þér þat eitt fyrir sigrinum, Hrólfr konungr, at þú hafðir ekki skyn á skapara þínum” [and only one thing stood in the way of victory for you, King Hrólfr, that you had no knowledge of your maker] (*Hrólfs saga kraka* 104). AM 9 fol. is a paper manuscript from the late seventeenth century, though it is presumed to have been copied from an earlier vellum (Slay 7–10). In isolation, Master Galterus cannot be assumed to represent a thirteenth-century perspective; but similar (though less overt) attitudes are nonetheless found from texts closer to the composition of *Laxdæla saga*. In *Flateyjarbók*, a number of *þættir* describe Óláfr Tryggvason's encounters with various beings from the fornöld, including Óðinn. These messengers from another time frequently offer knowledge based on their personal recollections of famous heroes, Hrólfr kraki among them. Like Master Galterus, Óláfr Tryggvason is repeatedly depicted as recognizing Hrólfr's martial and even political greatness, but Óláfr also identifies Hrólfr's lack of Christian faith as his damning flaw (Kaplan 187–92). From this perspective, Sköfnungr finds in Þorkell a chieftain and thus a ruler who fulfills the very lack which Master Galterus says proved fatal to Hrólfr. Meanwhile Þorkell benefits from Sköfnungr's metonymic association with King Hrólfr as the archetype of a brave and wise king. Together Þorkell and Sköfnungr achieve a kind of synthesis between medieval Scandinavian secular and religious ideologies. The distributive personhood bonding human and nonhuman also brings the highest lineage of ancient heroism into the service of new Christian leaders, specifically Icelandic Christian leaders.

Sköfnungr is the last named weapon mentioned in *Laxdæla saga*, so the vector connecting these objects together ends with its burial in Roskilde. In this way, Sköfnungr provides a conclusion to the narrative arc of the Laxdælir men and their Konungsnautr weapons. Sköfnungr might even be considered a kind of Konungsnautr itself, considering how Skeggi gets it from Hrólfr kraki. According to Torfing (2016), the element *-nautr* is common in the names of objects taken from grave robbing. Yet the sword also resembles Fótbítr since the provenances of both weapons stem from pagan rulers, though Fótbítr's vector carries a negative

influence while Skoþnunar's vector carries a more positive one. Clearly, there are multiple vectors that can be traced through these objects, not only from their pagan points of origin but through every other embodied human who interacts with them, and even between the various objects themselves. Those many narrative patterns, or lines of influence, twine together at the end of the saga in Skoþnunar. The sword elevates Þorkell as a successor not only of the Laxdælir family, but also as the inheritor of the ancient kings of the North. Þorkell may not compare favourably to the Norwegian king in terms of worldly wealth or rank, but he has his own claim to greatness that he passes on to Gellir through the sword.

Unlike Þorkell who drowns in Breiðafjörður without completing his church, Gellir dies well and after a long life capped with a successful pilgrimage to Rome. His burial at Roskilde with Skoþnunar reenacts Hrólfr kraki's own burial at Lejre and connects past and present. But Skoþnunar ultimately remains with the Christian in the grave rather than truly going back to the pagan, so that past and present are not exactly united but instead the new religion supersedes the old one. It is worth noting that Gellir's descendants include such learned ecclesiastics as Ari Þorgilsson (*Laxdæla saga* 293). The new basis of Icelandic greatness lies in Christianity, but a Christianity strengthened by ancient and noble lineages—with little room for imitating the latest worldly fashions of the Norwegian court.

In conclusion, this article has tried to demonstrate new ways in which objects are “good to think with,” particularly by exploring how things in the mind remain somewhat like things in the hand. That is to say, material entities represented both in literature and in memory continue to be useful to the conscious mind as the mind recalls their own materiality. Material things in the immediately perceptible physical world reinforce memory; but memory also makes surprisingly lively use of the representations it contains, as if they were things in the world. The dynamic relations between matter and memory trouble the very concepts of subject and object, and the play between these ontological categories calls attention to their ultimate bases in rhetoric—hence, object rhetoric. This power can be conveyed through language, but it ultimately arises from the extralinguistic capacities of matter as perceived by human minds. The surprising liveliness of the named weapons in *Laxdæla saga* illustrates object rhetoric in action for thirteenth-century Icelanders, through which they developed a meaningful sense of themselves amidst dramatically changing political, religious, and social circumstances.

#### NOTES

1. All translations are my own

## REFERENCES

- Assmann, Jan. 2005. *Religion and Cultural Memory*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cultural Memory in the Present. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Baier, Katharina, and Werner Schäfer. 2016. "When the Dead No Longer Rest: The Religious Significance of Revenants in Sagas Set in Viking Age Settlements Around the Time of Conversion." In *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Conditions of the Culture of Death*. Edited by Albrecht Classen, 131–54. Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 16. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Barnes, Geraldine. 2000. "Romance in Iceland." In *Old Icelandic Literature in Society*. Edited by Margaret Clunies Ross, 266–86. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bennett, Jane. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Brown, Bill. 2001. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1): 1–22.
- Carruthers, Mary. 2008. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. 2nd ed. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 10. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clanchy, Michael T. 1979. *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coroban, Costel. 2018. *Ideology and Power in Norway and Iceland, 1150–1250*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Grønbech, Vilhelm. 1909a. "Klenodier." In *Helliged Og Helligdom*, 2: 9–24. *Vor Folkeæt i Oldtiden I–IV*. Copenhagen: Jespersen og Pios Forlag.
- . 1909b. "Sejrsværdet Og Tvistmalmen." In *Helliged Og Helligdom*, 2: 25–36. *Vor Folkeæt i Oldtiden I–IV*. Copenhagen: Jespersen og Pios Forlag.
- Grønvik, Ottar. 2000. "Om Eggjainnskriften Enda En Gang." *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 115: 5–22.
- Heidegger, Martin. 2010. *Being and Time: A Revised Edition of the Stambaugh Translation*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Hermann, Pernille. 2009. "Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature." *Scandinavian Studies* 81 (3): 287–308.

- Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans*. 1954. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 1. Edited by Guðni Jónsson, 1–105. Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan.
- Jakobsson, Ármann. 1998. “Konungasagan Laxdæla.” *Skírnir* 172: 357–83.
- . 2002. “Our Norwegian Friend: The Role of Kings in the Family Sagas.” *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 117: 145–60.
- . 2007. “Laxdæla Dreaming: A Saga Heroine Invents Her Own Life.” *Leeds Studies in English* 39: 35–54.
- Kalinke, Marianne E. 2011a. “Arthurian Echoes in the Icelandic Sagas.” In *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms*, 145–67. Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages V. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- . 2011b. “The Introduction of the Arthurian Legend in Scandinavia.” In *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus’ Realms*, 5–21. Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages V. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Kaplan, Merrill. 2011. *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the Past in Four Tales in Flateyjarbók*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.
- Karlsson, Gunnar. 2000. *The History of Iceland*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Karras, Ruth Mazo. 1988. *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kormáks saga*. 1939. In *Vatnsdæla saga. Hallfreðar saga. Kormáks saga. Hrómundar þáttur halta. Hrafn þáttur Guðrúnarsonar*. Edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 201–302. Íslenzk fornrit 8. Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Kristinsson, Axel. 2003. “Lords and Literature: The Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments.” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28 (1): 1–17.
- Landnámabók*. 1968. In *Íslendingabók - Landnámabók*. Edited by Jakob Benediktsson, 29–397. Íslenzk fornrit 1. Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Laxdæla saga*. 1934. In *Laxdæla saga. Halldórs þættir Snorrasonar. Stúfs þáttur*. Edited by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 3–248. Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag.
- Lethbridge, Emily. 2016. “The Icelandic Sagas and Saga Landscapes: Writing, Reading and Retelling Íslendingasögur Narratives.” *Gripla* 27: 51–92.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2005. *Totemism*. Translated by Rodney Needham. Boston: Beacon paperback.

- Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Motz, Lotte. 1983. *The Wise One of the Mountain: Form, Function, and Significance of the Subterranean Smith: A Study in Folklore*. Göppinger Arbeiten Zur Germanistik 379. Göppingen: Kümmerle.
- The Saga of the Jómsvikings: A Translation with Full Introduction*. 2018. Edited and translated by Alison Finlay and Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir. Northern Medieval World. Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University Medieval Institute Publications.
- Sigurðsson, Gísli. 2004. *The Medieval Icelandic Saga and Oral Tradition: A Discourse on Method*. Translated by Nicholas Jones. Publications of the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature 2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sigurðsson, Jón Viðar. 2010. "Historical Writing and the Political Situation in Iceland 1100–1400." In *Negotiating Pasts in the Nordic Countries: Interdisciplinary Studies in History and Memory*. Edited by Anne Eriksen and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, 59–78. Chicago, IL: Nordic Academic Press.
- Slay, Desmond. 1960. *The Manuscripts of Hrólfs saga kraka*. Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana 24. Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard.
- Torfinn, Lisbeth. 2015. "Om Navne Og Nautr: En Undersøgelse af Betydning og Ordklasse for en Gruppe Genstandsbetegnelser i Norrøn Litteratur." *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi* 130: 33–56.
- . 2016. "Genstandsnavne, genstandsliv. En biografisk undersøgelse af navngivne genstande i norrøn kultur." Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus Universitet.
- Warren, Michelle. 2000. *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Örvar-Odds saga. 1954. In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*. Vol. 2. Edited by Guðni Jónsson, 199–363. Reykjavik: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan.