The Family Life of the Dwarfs and its Significance for Relationships between Dwarfs and Humans in the Sagas

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This paper discusses the relationships between dwarfs and humans in the sagas, focusing on Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjbána, Þorsteins þáttur baþarmagns and Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar. It is argued that dwarfs’ family life is important to the relationships between dwarfs and humans and that human heroes are able to manipulate dwarfs by playing on their emotions, namely their love for their birth children and foster-children (emotional or psychological manipulation); however the human hero may also create a ‘gift contract’ with the dwarf by giving a present or doing a service to the dwarf’s child (moral manipulation). Presents are given to the dwarf’s child rather than directly to the adult dwarf because the human hero cannot risk having his present rejected. The two types of manipulation are not mutually exclusive; one can often talk of psychological and a moral aspect of an action. The source texts show that the emotional life of the dwarfs is much richer, and the relationships between dwarfs and humans are far more complex, than many previous scholars have recognised.

This article discusses the family life of dwarfs and its significance for the relationships between dwarfs and humans in Old Norse sagas, focusing on three sagas: Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjbána, Þorsteins þáttur baþarmagns and Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar. The focus of the discussion is on analysis of the sagas as literary texts, particularly on aspects of the emotional life of individual dwarfs and how this affects their relationship with humans, rather than on the role the dwarfs play in Old Norse saga literature.

1. This research was financed by the Research Council of Norway (Norges forskningsråd). The author would like to thank professors Ármann Jakobsson (Reykjavik), Jon Gunnar Jørgensen (Oslo), Daniel Sävborg (Tartu), Dr. Werner Schäfke (Freiburg/Copenhagen), and all the participants of the traditional Wednesday lunch at the Institute of Linguistic and Nordic studies, University of Oslo for inspiring discussions and constructive criticism.

Norse mythology or a reconstruction of an Ur-dwarf (Jakobsson 2008). One of the issues discussed is whether dwarfs (and other supernatural beings, such as jötnar or æsir) are distinct from humans, as both are sometimes referred to as maðr in the Old Norse source texts.

In the author’s opinion the chronology of the sagas is irrelevant to these themes in the context of the subject of this paper; their interest and value is independent of their age although as subsequent discussion will make clear, many scholars disagree with this stance.

The point of departure for this research was a quote from an article by Jakobsson: “There is no doubt that dwarfs have the same function as other supernatural Others, to define ourselves” (Jakobsson 2005: 69 f., emphasis added). This function emerges especially clearly in the episodes where dwarfs interact with humans and so a deliberate decision was made to concentrate on the dwarfs outside the Eddas. The Eddic dwarfs do not interact with humans, only with each other or with other supernatural beings (jötnar, æsir). Encounters between dwarfs and humans occur mainly in sagas describing the remote, pre-historic past, which in practice means fornaldrarsögur and ríddarasögur. Outside these texts there is only one well-known encounter between a dwarf and a human king, King Sveigðir, in Ynglinga saga (chapter 12), which is usually considered a kings’ saga as it is part of Heimskringla (note however the discussion of the Ynglinga saga genre in Jørgensen 2009 and Mundal 2009a). This is also a saga of pre-historic times. Writing about the sagas of the more recent past Jakobsson noted that “[d]warfs do not figure in the Sagas of the Icelanders and the contemporary sagas (Sturlunga saga and the sagas of bishops)” (Jakobsson 2008: 185). As early as 1924 de Boor wrote that “[d]ie historische Saga […] schweigt von Zwergen” (de Boor 1924: 552). In practice the only saga texts of interest in the context of this study, those in which the relationship between dwarfs and humans is examined, are those describing remote, pre-historic past.2

The reason for focusing on Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana,
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Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns and Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar was that the dwarfs in these sagas have children and/or foster-children.\(^3\) The fact that some dwarfs have children and/or foster-children has not received the attention it deserves thus far, although it may be of great significance to the discussion about the relationship between dwarfs and humans.\(^4\) This article hypothesises that a dwarf’s family (dwarf-children in particular) play an important role in individual relationships between humans and dwarfs.\(^5\) This article discusses evidence for this, including the behaviour of human heroes towards dwarf-children in the three selected sagas, Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana, Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns and Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar.

The rest of this article considers specific questions relevant to this

\(^3\) There are other sagas where dwarfs allegedly have children e.g., Þjalar Jóns saga, Gibbons saga, the younger Bósa saga, Ectors saga, Viktors saga ok Blávus, Nitíða saga, Sigradur saga þöglu and Síggars saga ok Valbrands (Schäfke 2010: 272–75). One could also add Norna-Gests þáttr to this list, as in it Reginn is referred to as a dwarf (dvergr) and Hreiðmarr’s son (sórn Hreiðmarts). There are thus at least twelve sagas and þáttir that mention dwarf families, but for the purposes of this article it is sufficient to discuss relevant episodes from the three selected sagas.

\(^4\) Some researchers have considered dwarf-children; publications referring to dwarf-children include, for example, de Boor (1924: 553), Jakobsson (2008: 105f., 200ff.), Barreiro (2008: 13) and Schäfke (2010: 271–75). This research notwithstanding the importance of dwarf family life in the relationship between dwarfs and humans has not yet been given sufficient weight by literary scholars.

\(^5\) Similar ideas are implicit in both older and newer scholarship, cf. the following quotations from 1924 and 2010, respectively. De Boor wrote: “Die zweite Erzählungsschablone ist […] der dankbare Zwerg als Spender überraschlicher Wundäuglinge. Am klarsten liefert sie der Þorsteinsþátt bæjarmagns […] Der Held trifft einen weienden Zwerg, dem soeben ein Adler sein Kind geraubt hat; der Held schießt den Adler aus der Luft herab und rettet das Kind. Er erhält von dem Zwerg dafür drei wunderbare Gaben […] Am nächsten kommt dann die Zwergenezone der Egilssaga og Ás-
hypothesis, and to our understanding of the relationship between dwarfs and humans in the sagas:

1. Are dwarfs distinct from humans?
2. Is it possible to generalise about relationships between dwarfs and humans?
3. Do dwarfs have family?
4. Is family important for the particular dwarfs considered in this article? How are dwarf families relevant to relationships between dwarfs and humans?
5. How important are relationships between dwarfs and humans for the latter?
6. What can we learn about ourselves from the interactions between dwarfs and humans in the sagas?

1. Are dwarfs distinct from humans?
Before discussing the relationship between dwarfs and humans it is important to consider a general question, are dwarfs really distinct from humans? Consider the following sentences from Áns saga bogsveigis:

Án gekk í eitt skógarrjóðr. Hann sá þar stein einn standa mikinn ok

mundar [...]. Auch hier wunderbare Gaben als Dank für gute Behandlung eines Zwergenkindes [...]. Noch weiter geht in dieser Beziehung die Försteinssaga Vikingssonar [...], wo der Märchenzwerg als übertünichtlicher Helfer im Kampf gegen riesische Gegner auftritt [...]” (de Boor 1924: 553). De Boor’s main aim appears to show that ‘the grateful dwarf’ is a more recent motif than ‘dwarfs as producers of weapon’ (”den Zwerg als Waffenschmied”, ibid., p. 552) rather than analysis of the relationship between dwarfs and humans in the sagas. Almost a century later Schäfke wrote “Schließlich wird er (=der Protagonist – U.M.) eines Zwergenkindes gewahr und gibt ihm einen Goldring. Dies resultiert, gleichsam wie die Rettung eines Zwergenmädchens [sic, should it not be “Zwergensohnes”? – UM] vor einer bösen Kreatur, in der Belohnung durch den glücklichen Zwergenvater.” (Schäfke 2010: 272). The trope of ‘the grateful dwarf’ is well-known; what is this article attempts is a more detailed analysis of the mechanics of gratitude and its implications in this context. Why is there this ‘gute Behandlung eines Zwergenkindes’ from the human hero’s side in the first place, and why is the human hero rewarded by the dwarf? What role does the dwarf’s family play?

6. Thanks to Ármann Jakobsson, personal communication, for drawing my attention to the problem.

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_mann_ hjá einum læk. Hann hafði heyrt nefnda dverga ok þat með, at þeir væri hagari en aðrir _menn_.

Áns saga bogsveigis, chapter 1, pp. 404f., emphasis added

An went into a clearing in the forest. There he saw a single large stone, and _a man_ standing next to a stream. He had heard mention of dwarves, and he’d also heard that they were more skilful than other _men_.

The Saga of An Bow-Bender, trans. Waggoner, p. 161, emphasis added

The use of _mann_ (‘a man’, acc.sg.) and _en aðrir menn_ (‘than other men’), perhaps suggests that in this particular text dwarves are in seen as a certain class, or a type of human people rather than as a separate species.

However this author is not convinced that the noun _maðr_ (pl. _menn_) necessarily means _Homo sapiens_. The famous story about Baldr’s death in _Snorra Edda_ reads:

[...] Loki tók mistiltein ok sleit upp ok gekk til þings. En Hǫðr stóð útarliga í _mannhringinum_ þvíat hann var blindr. Þá mælir Loki við hann:
‘Hví skýtr þú ekki at Baldri?’
Hann svarar: ‘Þvíat ek sé eigi hvar Baldr er, ok þat annat at ek em vápnauss.’
Þá mælir Loki: ‘Gerðu þó í líking annarra _manna_ ok veit Baldri sœmð sem aðrir _menn_. Ek mun visa þér til hvar hann stendr. Skjót at honum vendi þessum.’

_Edda_, pp. 45f., emphasis added

[...] Loki took mistletoe and plucked it and went to the assembly. Hod was standing at the edge of the _circle of people_, for he was blind. Then Loki said to him:
‘Why are you not shooting at Baldr?’
He replied: ‘Because I cannot see where Baldr is, and secondly because I have no weapon.’
Then said Loki: ‘Follow other _people’s_ example and do Baldr honour
like other people. I will direct you to where he is standing. Shoot at him this stick.’

Edda, trans. Faulkes, p. 48, emphasis added

Here Snorri and Loki apply the nouns *maðr/menn* to the *æsir*, suggesting that in this context they have a more general meaning, ‘anthropomorphic being, able to think and to speak’ rather than referring specifically to *Homo sapiens*. Whatever interpretation one chooses this quotation from Áns saga bogsveigs provides a good illustration of the problem.

When it is necessary to draw a distinction between *Homo sapiens* and other beings, the adjective *mennskir* (human) is added to the noun *menn* (men, people) in the Old Norse sources. The following sentences from Saga Þiðriks af Bern provide an illustration of this practice:

Vadi heard in Sjoland that there were two dwarfs living in a mountain called Kallava. These dwarfs were better at smithing iron than any others, whether dwarf or human.

The Saga of Thidrek of Bern, trans. Haymes, p. 40

Here the saga seems deliberately to distinguish between dwarfs (*dvergar*) and humans (*mennskir menn*). The noun *menn* is not sufficient to express this distinction; the saga author has qualified the noun with the adjective *mennskir* in order to contrast *dvergar* with humans (*mennskir menn*).

The next case is even more complicated. Reginn is a mysterious figure who is known from both the Eddas and from several other sagas. He is a smith (like many dwarfs), but he is not explicitly called a *dvergr* in all sources. In Norna-Gests þáttir (chapter 4) Reginn is characterised as “hverjum manni hagari ok dvergr á vöxt, vitr maðr, grímr ok fjölkunnig” (“He was the most cunning of men, but a dwarf in stature, a wise man, but stern and skilled in magic”, trans. Hardman). The same þáttir calls him Reginn *dvergr*
on a later occasion, in chapter 5. In other sources, such as Völsunga saga, Reginn is not explicitly called a dwarf. There may be no simple answer to the question of whether Reginn is a human or a dwarf. Jakobsson argued that Egill and his ancestors might be both human and non-human at the same time (Jakobsson 2011); perhaps a similar argument applies to Reginn, and he too is both human and non-human, i.e. dwarf, at the same time?

Tristram dvergr in Tristrands saga ok Ísöndar provides another intriguing example of this apparent dual nature:

Ek em einn riddari, byggjandi hér í landamæri á Bretlandi, ok em ek kallaðr Tristram dvergr — röngu nafni; þvi at ek em manna mestr [...]

Tristrands saga ok Ísöndar, p. 212

I am a knight and I live here on the border of Brittany. They call me Tristram the Dwarf, a misnomer, since I am a very large man.

Tristrands saga ok Ísöndar, trans. Jorgensen, p. 213

Perhaps Tristram also is both a human and a dwarf at the same time? Why else would he be called Tristram dvergr? If Reginn is dvergr á vöxt, perhaps Tristram is maðr á vöxt and both characters, Reginn and Tristram, are simultaneously humans and dwarfs?

A confusing “solution” to the problem of distinguishing between dwarfs and humans is provided in Sörla þáttr eða Heðins saga ok Högna:

Menn þeir váru í Asia, er einn hét Álfriðr, annarr Dvalinn, þríði Berlingr, fjórdi Grérr. Þeir áttu heima skammt frá höll konungs. Þeir váru menn svá hagir, at þeir lögðu á allt gerva hönd. Þess háttar menn, sem þeir váru, kölluðu menn dverga. Þeir byggðu einn stein. Þeir blönduðust þá meir við mannfólk en nú.

Sörla þáttr eða Heðins saga ok Högna, chapter 1, p. 97

There were some men in Asia, one called Alfrigg, the next Dvalin,

then Berling and Grer. They had their home not far from the king’s hall. They were such skilled craftsmen they could turn their hand to anything and do well. Men such as these were called dwarves. They lived in a certain stone. They mixed with people more in those days than now.

Sorli’s Tale or The Saga of Hedin & Hogni, trans. Tunstall

Here the dwarfs are described as a kind of people (menn), who mixed more with human people (mannfólk) in the old days than now. It is suggested that whilst some sagas draw a distinction between dvergar and mennskir menn, in others the dvergar may be treated as both dwarf and human at the same time. A more thorough analysis of this problem is beyond the scope of this article.

This article will follow usage in the saga texts and therefore deals only with episodes where dwarfs are explicitly referred to as ‘dwarfs’ (dvergar).

2. Towards some generalisations about dwarf-human relationships. Some observations about previous scholarship on dwarfs

This article is primarily concerned with relationships between particular dwarfs and particular humans and a general discussion of dwarfs is beyond its scope. Furthermore, this author does not believe it is possible to provide a definition of a ‘prototypical dwarf’. Although many dwarfs share certain characteristics, there are important differences between individual dwarfs. This scepticism about generalisations relating to dwarfs (especially the saga dwarfs) is not shared by the scholars who have attempted to provide descriptions of dwarfs as a homogenous class or to reconstruct the original, underlying ‘proto-dwarf’. There has been a considerable amount of research on dwarfs, especially on:

- dwarfs’ role as smiths and producers of weapons or other magic objects (de Boor 1924: 552; Boberg 1966: 61, 109f.; Motz 1983)
- dwarfs’ names (Gould 1929; Boberg 1966: 111; Motz 1973; Motz 1993b; cf. also Liberman 2002a, b on etymology of the word dvergr)
- dwarf dwelling places (Boberg 1966: 110; Motz 1977)
Not much attention has been paid to the relationship between dwarfs and humans, or the family life of dwarfs (see however Motz 1977, especially p. 47, on interactions between dwarfs and humans in heroic and romantic sagas; Jakobsson 2008, on dwarfs as agents of love and Schäfke 2012, on the motif of the ‘extorted dwarf’).

That the authors who have attempted general observations about the relationship between dwarfs and humans, have come to different, even irreconcilable, conclusions is testament to the difficulty of providing a general characterisation of dwarfs. Munch wrote:

\[Dvergenes viktigste syssel var smedarbeid, og i det kunne ingen måle seg med dem. Alle ypperlige våpen og kostelige klenodier som vi hører om i de eldste sagn, var gjort av kunstferdige dverger. Dvergene var hatske på guder og mennesker og var uvillige til å arbeide for dem. Når de var nødt til det, søkte de gjerne å gi sitt verk en trolldomsaktig uhellbringende egenskap så eieren fikk liten glede av det […]\]

Munch 1967: 80, emphasis added

The chief occupation of the Dwarfs was that of smith, in which they had no rivals. All the most notable weapons and all the precious gems mentioned in the oldest myths were the work of cunning Dwarfs. *The Dwarfs hated both gods and men* and were unwilling to do them service; if nevertheless they were compelled to do so, they strove to give their handiwork some magic quality of evil omen so that it brought little joy to any one who came into possession of it.

Munch 1926: 41, trans. Hustvedt, emphasis added

In this quotation Munch appears to have only the Eddic dwarfs in mind, although no explicit distinction is drawn between the different groups of dwarfs. It should be noted that this quotation is taken from an edition of *Norrøne gude- og heltesagn*, revised by Holtsmark, that is, a book focussing on the Eddas and mythology; given Munch’s aims and perspective the sagas, and especially the late sagas, may have been of little interest. This
article attempts to show that by no means all saga dwarfs hated humans in the strict sense of the word. On the contrary, some of the saga dwarfs show unconditional loyalty, helpfulness and even love to humans and others reward the human hero to show gratitude for a service rendered.

This contrast is exemplified by a recent article on Sámi people in which Kusmenko writes:

The stereotypical features of the Sámi in Old Scandinavian literature have resulted from the interaction between the real features of the Sámi, features and motifs from Sámi folklore, and the stereotypical characteristics of Scandinavian supernatural beings expressing the idea of “otherness” (referring to giants and dwarves), the prevailing features of the giants being negative (the “hostile others”), the prevailing features of the dwarves being positive (the “friendly others”).

Kusmenko 2014: 63, emphasis added

There is a significant chronological gap between the publication of Munch’s book and Kusmenko’s article, and the two authors had rather different aims, so comparing their claims may not be justified or even sensible. It is, however, important to be aware of the fact that different authors have come to completely different conclusions about the character of dwarfs, depending on their aims and perspective.

Motz provided a more nuanced description of the dwarfs, characterising the relationships between dwarfs and gods or heroes as both helpful and vengeful, suggesting that there are significant individual differences between dwarfs which influence their relationships with other beings, including humans.

We may conclude that these features belong to the dwarfs though not defining them completely: of a craftsman who lives mysteriously in stone and rock in distance from the community he may serve and whose position before gods or heroes may be described by one or more of the following adjectives: helpful, deprived, insulted, vengeful.

Motz 1977: 49, emphasis added
What follows will demonstrate that saga dwarfs may have had a much richer emotional life than some authors, e.g. Munch, seem to have recognised. Dwarfs who have family are far from indifferent fathers; this enables human heroes to gain the friendship of adult dwarfs by being generous towards dwarf-children. Some dwarfs are foster-fathers to a human hero and help their human foster-sons. At least one such foster-father is so faithfully and unconditionally devoted to his human foster-son that he risks his own life to help him (Littr the dwarf helps his foster-son Hálfðan in Porsteins saga Vikingssonar; this episode is discussed later in the article).

3. Do dwarfs have family? Previous scholarship on the existence of female dwarfs and on dwarfs’ reproductive capacity

This article concentrates on Porsteins saga Vikingssonar, Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana and Porsteins þáttr hejarmagns because the dwarfs in these three sagas have children and/or foster-children, so the short answer is definitely yes, at least some of the dwarfs in the sagas do have families. A short overview of earlier scholarship on dwarfs which is relevant to the theme is provided before more detailed analysis of the texts which are the focus of this article.

Although several sagas explicitly mention dwarf-children, many scholars who have written about dwarfs seem to have deemed this information a relatively late and consequently unimportant invention. Much has been made of the fact that most dwarfs in the Old Norse literature are male. Some authors (e.g. Clunies Ross 1994: 165, 167f. and references therein) have even claimed that all dwarfs, without exception, are male,

8. Svamr the dwarf in Þjalar Jóns saga is also a foster-father to a human hero, Gestr, cf. “Þa mælti Gestr: ’Ek hefi bedit duerg þenna, er verit hefer fostri min, ath hann mundi lia þer skip vm hafti, ath sigla til þeira landa, sem ek vil|da fara, enn hann lett seint vid.’ Eirekr spyr, hueria leigo hann vil epter taka. Duergrimm: ’Ef þu vil vera minnigr ok fara fram radum Geitzz bessa, er mik kallar fostra sin; man þa duga ath nöckuro bofi, ef audna vil til falla, enn eigi elligar.’ (Þjalar Jóns saga, 10f.). These examples clearly demonstrate that dwarfs could be foster-fathers to humans, which is relevant to any discussion of the relationship between dwarfs and humans.

9. As footnote 3 points out, there are scholars who have paid attention to the dwarf-children in the sagas, e.g., Jakobsson wrote that “[t]he romance dwarfs […] have children, and their domestic life is quite similar to that of an Icelandic farmer” (Jakobsson 2008: 202) and Schäfke devotes a whole section of a study on dwarfs in the saga literature to Zwergenkinder (Schäfke 2010: 271–75).
a claim which can easily be shown to be incorrect, at least with respect to the dwarfs in the sagas; the Eddic dwarfs and their family life are outside the scope of this article. In the encyclopaedia *Medieval Scandinavia* Motz wrote: “Dwarfs are all male, and they arose asexually, moulded from the earth or generated in giant’s blood (*Völuspá*, st. 9). They do not engage in fruitful sexual encounters.” (Motz 1993a: 623). Presumably Motz is only referring to Eddic dwarfs here. It is nevertheless worth noting the statement that “[i]n both myth and literature, dwarfs serve beings of higher status than themselves to whom they offer their products willingly or under coercion. […] Dwarfs in folktales show strong resemblances to their counterparts in myth and literature.” (Motz 1993a: 623). Earlier Motz wrote:

Finding great resemblance in the function, talents and surroundings between the dwarfs of the works of literary and those of religious aspect (though the line cannot be clearly drawn) I allow myself to regard the medieval sagas as a force which preserved through a literary convention the image, though somewhat narrowed, of what was probably a figure of a living faith.

Motz 1977: 49

Motz does not draw any distinctions between dwarfs in folklore, saga dwarfs and Eddic dwarfs with respect to reproductive ability or family life. This failure to differentiate between dwarfs in different kinds of texts (in particular, sagas vs. the Eddas or, as Motz puts it, literary and religious works) leads to overgeneralisation. Female dwarfs are mentioned far less frequently, even in the sagas; however there is evidence which contradicts categorical statements about this remarkable absence of female dwarfs. For instance Clunies Ross wrote: “There are not, in fact, any female dwarves in the whole of Old Norse myth, as both Motz (1973; 1981–2, 240) and Steinsland (1983, 85) have noted, with the exception of a very late feminine form *dyrgja* in *Bjalar Jóns saga*.” (Clunies

10. According to Jakobsson, there are three categories of dwarf in Old Norse literature: 1) individual Eddic dwarfs, 2) generic dwarfs in the Eddas, and 3) later dwarfs, i.e. the dwarfs of romances and folktales (cf. Jakobsson 2008: 184). Jakobsson dealt with the first two categories of dwarf in “The Hole” (2005), and with the third category of dwarf in “Enabling Love” (2008).
Ross 1994: 168). This is not correct; it is the Þjalar Jóns saga which is late (the oldest manuscript is dated around 1400, cf. Tan-Haverhorst in the introduction to an edition of Þjalar Jóns saga, p. II), not the form dyrgja. Liberman has written of the word dyrgja that:

The evidence of a 14th century text would have been of no consequence if the word in question were *dvergja, but dyrgja looks like having the zero grade of ablaut (y < *u b i-umlaut), as opposed to dvergr, which displays the normal grade (e). If this impression is true, this noun must be old and needs an explanation.

Liberman 2002b: 261

Liberman also does not believe that dyrgja is etymologically related to dvergr. It seems plausible that dyrgja is indeed an old noun. This author does not however share Liberman’s view that the evidence from a late saga would have been of no consequence if the noun in question were an innovation; one can research late sagas and recognise them as valuable in and of themselves. Schäfke has discovered two more female dwarfs (dyrgjur) in the saga literature, making a total of three dyrgjur: “Das sind Svama in der Þjalar Jóns saga, eine unbenannte dyrgja in der jüngeren Bósa saga und eine ebenfalls unbenannte dyrgja in der Hs. AM 585c, 4° der Gibbons saga” (Schäfke 2010: 270).

The relevant quotations from the three sagas mentioned by Schäfke are given below.

11. This particular sentence from Clunies Ross’s work is quoted because several other authors have also referred to Þjalar Jóns saga and the noun dyrgja, which occurs therein. It has become almost a commonplace to claim that the dyrgja of Þjalar Jóns saga is the only female dwarf in all the Old Norse sources, e.g. Thorvaldsen wrote: “[…] kildene nevner ikke annet enn mannlige dverger, sett bort fra en sen referanse til en kvinnelig dverg (dyrgja) i Þjalar Jóns saga” (Thorvaldsen 2013: 492 cf. Liberman (2002b). The noun dyrgja is also included in several Old Norse dictionaries including those of. Fritzner, Cleasby & Vigfusson and Heggstad et al. Previous scholars were obviously aware of the existence the noun dyrgja, but it has often been claimed erroneously that Þjalar Jóns saga is the only text where this noun appears. The Old Norse Prose Dictionary, unlike the other dictionaries, provides an example of the noun dyrgja taken from Gibbons saga as well as the example from Þjalar Jóns saga. Schäfke is the only scholar who has noted the occurrence dyrgja in the younger Bósa saga in addition to the two other sagas. Many other scholars have treated the occurrence of this noun as of little importance and emphasised that Þjalar Jóns saga is a late saga.
If one is interested in saga dwarfs as they appear in the texts, and chooses not to disregard the late sagas, one has to agree with Schäfke’s observation that “[s]o finden sich in den Texten nur dann Zwergenfrauen, wenn es auch mindestens einen Zwerg gibt. Trotz dieser peripheren Stellung muss also Behauptungen wie der von Motz (1993b: 84) widersprochen werden: ‘[…] the race of dwarfs does not encompass women.’” (Schäfke 2010: 270). It is clear that in the sagas there are counter-examples, albeit they are few in number, to claims that female dwarfs do not exist; nevertheless the dygjur are only mentioned alongside male dvergar and they do not seem to play important, independent roles in the sagas.
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One might speculate that female dwarfs were more frequently mentioned at earlier times in oral stories which were either never recorded or did not survive. Liberman suggested that female dwarfs did not appear in oral or written tradition until the late medieval development of storytelling and, more particularly, romances (cf. Liberman 2002b: 262), but we cannot know for certain whether and how female dwarfs figured in oral or written tradition predating the surviving texts. The facts that the noun *dyrgja* exists in Old Norse, and was not a late innovation, may be regarded as an indication that people in the Middle Ages had a concept of female dwarfs. Liberman’s conclusion that “[t]he original meaning of *dyrgja* must have been ‘giantess, troll woman’ while the connection of both *dyrgja* and *dyrgill* with *dvergr* is due to folk etymology” (Liberman 2002b: 261) is not necessarily correct. To the best of this author’s knowledge there are no Old Norse texts in which the word *dyrgja* is used to denote giantesses, or anything other than female dwarfs. Liberman acknowledged that the prehistory of *dyrgja, dyrgill* and *dugg(u)r* is unknown, so we have no definitive definition of *dyrgja*, assuming that it does not simply mean ‘female dwarf’. Even if the connection between *dyrgja* and *dvergr* were due to folk etymology, and even if it were true that female dwarfs occurred in neither oral nor written stories before the fourteenth century, it would still be indisputable that there are sagas mentioning female dwarfs, and calling them *dyrgjur*. The main question is whether these sagas are interesting enough to be taken into account, and that is a question which scholars researching dwarfs must answer individually. In the context of this article they clearly are of interest.

It is important to make clear that it is not claimed that scholars like Motz were unaware of the existence of female dwarfs in the sagas. Liberman followed Motz in recognising at least one recorded instance of a dwarf with a female name (*Herríðr*) in the sagas, albeit in a late saga (see Liberman 2002b: 261 and the reference there to Motz 1973).12 It obvious

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12. Liberman, who referred to Motz, claimed that the name *Herríðr* was the only female dwarf-name among approximately two hundreds dwarf-names. Actually, Motz gave a slightly lower number of dwarf names, and she described *Herríðr* as “an exception”, not “the only exception”. Cf. “One hundred and ninety names may be found in a list compiled by Chester N. Gould in which, however, the various forms of a given name are counted as separate units” (Motz 1973: 100) and “The maleness of the human actors finds a counterpart in the maleness of the dwarfs who alone among the mythical families count no women among them and whose names are, accordingly, masculine (an exception is the name *Herríðr*, found in a late saga)” (Motz 1973: 107).
that both Motz and Liberman were fully aware of the existence of Her-ríðr, the daughter of Sindri the dwarf in *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar*. One can be confident that both Motz and Liberman were also aware of the occurrence of *dyrgja* in the famous *Þjalar Jóns saga*. Including *Svama* from *Þjalar Jóns saga* brings the number of female dwarf names to two, but one might still argue that two female names out of approximately two hundred is a very low proportion, about one per cent. The objection to this argument is that one can juggle with statistics to prove virtually anything. There are twelve Old Norse sagas mentioning *dwarf families* (i.e. dwarf-wives and/or dwarf-children) out of a total of thirty sagas mentioning *dwarfs*, so one might argue that forty per cent of dwarfs had families. This would put a very different complexion on the debate, but such statistical data is not germane to the main argument of this article.

The information about dwarf families in the sagas was of little importance to Motz and Liberman in their research, which was primarily concerned with reconstructing the prototypical dwarf figure of mythology. The subject of this article is the family life of the individual dwarfs in the sagas, so the narratives of the sagas, including the late sagas, are pertinent.

4. Is family important for the particular dwarfs considered in this article? How are dwarf families relevant to relationships between dwarfs and humans?

We turn now to the main part of our discussion, namely, the family life of the dwarfs and its significance for the relationship between dwarfs and humans.

In *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* there is an episode involving an unnamed dwarf with a child whose gender is not specified. Egill, who is severely wounded, places a golden ring in the dwarf-child’s bucket. The child returns to the stone where it apparently lives and a moment later the father emerges, looking for the man who had made his child happy. To reward Egill for his kindness to his child the dwarf-father does his best to heal Egill’s wounds and gives him many other valuable presents (*marga góða gripi*).

13. These numbers are based on Schäfke (2010: 198 and 272–75) and on personal communication with Schäfke. Cf. footnote 2. The *Flateyjarbók* version of the story about Svási and his daughter Snaefriðr is not included in the numbers.
Egil suffered a lot of pain from the arm. Two days later they came to another harbour and spent a night there. Egil couldn’t stand the pain any longer so he got out of bed and took a walk into the forest. He came to a stream and seemed to get some relief by holding the arm in the water and letting it wash over the wound. Then Egil saw a dwarf child coming out of a rock with a pail to fetch water. Egil picked a gold ring off his finger with his teeth and let it slip into the bucket, and the child ran with it back into the rock. A little later a dwarf came out of the rock and asked who had been so kind to his child. Egil told him his name and added that the way things stood, gold wasn’t much use to him. ‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said the dwarf. ‘Come with me into the rock.’ So that’s what Egil did. The dwarf began dressing the stump, and soon the pain had completely gone. In the morning the wound was healed. Then the dwarf set about making him a sword, and from the hilt he made a socket so deep, it reached up to the elbow, where it could be fitted to the arm. So now Egil found it easy to strike...
with the sword as if he still had the whole arm. The dwarf gave him a good many more things of value, and they parted the best of friends.

Egil and Asmund, Seven Viking Romances, trans. Pálsson and Edwards, p. 245

Finding a dwarf with a child does not come as a surprise to Egill. On the contrary, Egill seems to have expected to meet a dwarf-child and to have known where to go (to a rivulet in a forest) to increase the chances of such an encounter. Furthermore, Egill seems to know beforehand how to behave towards the dwarf-child in order to gain the goodwill and generosity of the father, the adult dwarf. Egill does not give the golden ring to the dwarf-child in ignorance of what will happen next; he needs the adult dwarf’s help, and gives the ring to the dwarf-child because he expects the dwarf-father to be so grateful that he will do his best to heal Egill’s wounds. The trope of the ‘grateful dwarf’ is long-established (cf. de Boor 1924: 553, Battles 2005: 44 and his reference to Lagerholm 1927: xxxvii; Lagerholm cites de Boor), but the two aspects connected to how the human hero is able to manipulate the dwarf to obtain his gratitude may not have been explicitly formulated by previous scholars.

Psychological aspect. Egill knows that adult dwarfs are able healers and, even more importantly from the perspective of the current article, he knows that dwarf-fathers are so fond of their children that by giving a golden ring to the child he will secure the father’s help. It is also important to note that Egill does not give the ring directly to the adult dwarf (this might imply that the dwarf was interested only in the gold), but to the child. This suggests that Egill is aware that dwarfs are loving and devoted fathers, and is using this knowledge in a deliberate attempt to manipulate the adult dwarf. The episode strongly suggests that dwarfs in general – or at least some dwarfs – are known to be loving and devoted fathers. If paternal devotion were a trait peculiar to this particular dwarf Egill would probably have sought his home, and the dwarf would probably have been named in the saga. Instead Egill goes to unnamed rivulet in an unnamed forest, where he meets a dwarf-child and a dwarf-father, neither of whom are given individual names, all of which suggests that we are dealing with a fairly typical dwarf-family. We are not told that Egill has special knowledge of dwarfs’ nature, so it seems plausible to conclude that dwarfs’ devotion to their children was generally known
among human heroes (at least in the context of this particular saga). Perhaps it is relevant that the dwarfs’ attitude is not so different from that of humans to their children. In brief, Egill gives the golden ring to the dwarf-child because he expects to earn the adult dwarf’s gratitude and goodwill.

Moral aspect. Another possible interpretation of this episode is that Egill gave the present to the child because he could not afford to risk his gift being rejected by the adult dwarf.\textsuperscript{14} The acceptance of a gift creates a kind of ‘gift-contract’ between the giver and the receiver, it constitutes a commitment or an obligation; the adult dwarf would be aware of this and might therefore refuse the gift and thus the contract. Evidence for this interpretation comes from the family sagas, for example the episode in \textit{Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar} in which Einarr Helgason skálaglámm leaves a decorated shield at Egill’s home when Egill is away and cannot accept or reject the present. When Egill comes home and finds out what Einarr has done, he becomes so furious that he wants to ride and catch Einarr and kill him. He exclaims:

\begin{quote}
Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann, at ek skyla þar vaka yfir ok yrkja um skjǫld hans?
\end{quote}

\textit{Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar}, chapter 78, p. 272

Damn the man! […] Does he really expect me to stay up all night making up a poem about his shield?

\textit{Egil’s saga}, trans. Pálsson, p. 218

Nevertheless, Egill made a \textit{drápa} afterwards, and he and Einarr remained friends for the rest of their lives: “\textit{Egill ok Einarr heldu vináttu sími, meðan þeir líðu háðir}” (\textit{Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar}, chapter 78, p. 273); “\textit{Egil and Einar stayed friends for the rest of their lives}” (trans. Pálsson, p. 218).

In brief, Egill einhendi seeks to enter a contract with the dwarf just as Einarr skálaglámm sought to ambush Egill Skalla-Grimsson; the gift is given to the child so that the adult has no opportunity to reject it, and

\textsuperscript{14} Thanks to Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, personal communication, for suggesting the idea to me – UM.

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as a father is obligated to fulfil the gift-contract into which his child has entered. Whether we think that this was psychological or moral manipulation – the two are not mutually exclusive – Egill einhendi has deliberately used the child to manipulate the dwarf-father; this episode in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* thus provides support for the hypothesis that a dwarf’s family (dwarf-children, in particular) play an important role in individual relationships between humans and dwarfs. The human hero has manipulated a particular dwarf by behaving in a specific way towards his child. The dwarf-child does not appear again in the saga, suggesting that its only function in the text is to provide the human hero with an opportunity to gain the adult dwarf’s goodwill.

There is another encounter between a human and an unnamed dwarf with a child in *Porseins þáttar bæjarmagns*, although the situation is somewhat different from the episode in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* discussed above. In this instance we are told explicitly that the child is a boy, the dwarf’s son. Þorsteinn sees a crying dwarf and asks why he is crying so loudly. The dwarf explains that an eagle has caught his son and that he will die from grief if he loses his son. Þorstein rescues the baby dwarf by shooting the eagle.

In the spring Thorstein made his ship ready and gathered a crew of twenty-four men. He sailed first to Jamtland, and one day when he...
was lying in harbour there he went ashore for a stroll. He came to a clearing and saw a hideous-looking dwarf standing there beside a huge boulder, screaming at the top of his voice. It seemed to Thorstein as if the dwarf’s mouth was twisted up to the ear on one side, and on the other side the nose overlapped the mouth. Thorstein asked the dwarf why he was acting like a madman. “No wonder, man!” said the dwarf. “Can’t you see that great eagle flying over there? It’s got hold of my son. It must be a devil sent by Odin himself. It would kill me to lose that child.” Thorstein aimed a shot at the eagle, hitting it under the wings, and the bird dropped down dead. Thorstein caught the dwarf’s boy as he fell and gave him back to his father. The dwarf was very happy and said. “My son and I owe you a great debt for saving his life, and now I’d like you to choose your own reward in gold and silver.”

What this episode has in common with the episode in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* is the adult dwarf’s caring and loving attitude towards his own child (the dwarf claims he will die if he loses the child). When Þorsteinn rescues the dwarf’s child from the mortal danger, the dwarf-father does his best to show his gratitude and to reward the human hero appropriately. First the dwarf offers gold and silver, but when Þorsteinn refuses the dwarf offers him magic presents which are so fine that Þorsteinn simply cannot refuse. Once again, it is important to note that the human hero does not save an adult dwarf, but a dwarf’s child. This is important for two reasons. First, it shows that dwarfs’ loving and caring attitude towards their children is generally known and may therefore be taken advantage of (psychological manipulation). Second, the service performed by the human hero puts the dwarf under an obligation; by rescuing the child the human hero has created a contract which obliges the dwarf to repay a moral debt, even if the hero is reluctant to accept repayment (moral contract or manipulation). Emotion and morality are not mutually exclusive motives and may play an equally important role in interactions between dwarfs and humans. The difference between the episodes in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* is that Þorsteinn, unlike Egill, did not consciously seek the meeting with the...
dwarf, the encounter is presented as coincidental; there is no deliberate, planned manipulation of the dwarf’s feelings by the human hero. Nevertheless, this episode confirms the hypothesis that a dwarf’s family plays an important role in his relationships with humans. Just as in *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* the dwarf-son in *Þorsteins þátr bajarmagns* does not reappear, so it appears that his only function in the text is to make sure the human hero receives gifts from the grateful dwarf-father.

In *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar*, Sindri the dwarf has both a son, Herrauðr, and a daughter, Herríðr. Þorsteinn wants Sindri to tell him how to defeat the viking Ötunfaxi but it is not easy to find the dwarf, so Þorsteinn goes to a rivulet, where he notices two children playing. It turns out that they are Sindri’s children. The girl, Herríðr, has lost her gold, and Porsteinn gives her some gold so that she will not risk punishment from her father. In return he asks her to mediate between him and Sindri the dwarf. Herríðr promises to do so, but says it would be best if Herrauðr, her brother, supported her, as Sindri never denies him anything (which could be interpreted as evidence of Sindri’s love for his son, perhaps even his pampering of his son), so Þorsteinn also gives presents to Herrauðr. Then the two dwarf-children go and fetch their father, who rewards Þorsteinn generously.¹⁵

¹⁵. Jakobsson describes Þorsteinn’s behaviour as bribery: “Þorsteinn bribes the children to fetch their father, Sindri the dwarf” (Jakobsson 2008: 201).
Thorstein set out in his boat and rowed to the island. He went ashore alone. And when he came to a brook, he saw that two children were playing by the brook, a boy and a girl. Thorstein asked them their names. The boy gave his name as Herraud, and the girl was Herrid. ‘I have lost my gold ring,’ she said. ‘I know that my father Sindri won’t like that. I must expect punishment.’ Thorstein said, ‘Here is a gold ring that I will give you.’ She accepted the gold and was glad to have it - ‘and I will give this to my father. Can’t I do something that would be helpful to you?’ ‘You can’t,’ said Thorstein, ‘but bring your father here to talk with me. Let it be so that he gives me advice about the matter that concerns me.’ ‘There’s only one way to get that done,’ said Herrid, ‘and that’s for Herraud my brother to do what I want, because Sindri indulges him in everything.’ ‘You know that I follow you in every way,’ said Herraud. Thorstein unbuckled his silver belt and gave it to him. An ornamented knife went with it. The boy said, ‘This is a fine gift. I will try with all my heart to see to it that your case goes forward. Wait here till my sister and I come back with him.’ Thorstein did so. When a long time had passed, Sindri the dwarf came there, and the brother and sister with him. Sindri greeted Thorstein cheerfully and said, ‘What do you want of me, Thorstein?’

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, pp. 44f.
Here is a little knife which Herrid my daughter will give you as a reward for the ring. I suppose it might bite Otunfaxi, if you use it skilfully. Herraud, my son, will reward you for the belt in this way: you shall call on me by name if it seems to you that something is going wrong. We will part for now. Fare well and hale. I pronounce that my disir shall go with you always.”

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, p. 45

It seems likely that rather than meeting Herrauðr and Herriðr by accident, Þorsteinn went to the rivulet – a place where encounters with dwarfs are likely – in the hope of meeting Sindri or his dwarf-children. An earlier conversation between Þorsteinn and Brennir is relevant here.

I have no advice to give you,’ said Brennir, ‘except that you should try to find the dwarf Sindri, because I know that he’s on bad terms with him, and he won’t be lacking in advice.’ ‘Where can I expect to find him?’ said Thorstein. ‘He has a home on the island that lies just a short distance off the land, called Lesser Brenniey. He lives in a stone, and I think it’s unlikely that you’ll manage to find him.

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, pp. 43–44
Although Brennir is sceptical about Þorsteinn’s chances of finding Sindri the dwarf, Þorsteinn obviously understands where and how he can increase the chances of an encounter. He also knows what he can expect from the dwarf-father if he gives presents to the dwarf-children and is quick to take advantage of his encounter with the two dwarf-children. Þorsteinn is subsequently rewarded by their father, Sindri, providing further evidence that dwarfs’ family play an important role in relationships between dwarfs and humans. Þorsteinn receives a magic weapon from Sindri in return for the gold he gave Herríðr. Sindri the dwarf also promises on behalf of his son to come to his aid if called. Later Þorsteinn calls upon Sindri twice, and both times he is rescued.

Episode 1

Þorsteinn þótti þá vita, at Faxi ætlar at bita sundr barkann í honum. Þorsteinn mælti: ‘Hvat mun mér annan tíma meiri þörf á þér, Sindri dvergr, en nú?’ Þorsteinn varð við þat varr, at gripit var á herðar Faxa svá hart, at því næst var hann við grunni niðri ok Þorsteinn ofan á honum. Hann var þá mjök móðr ok þjakaðr af umfangi þeira. Þorsteinn tekr þá tygilknífinn, sem Sindri gaf honum. Hann stingr honum fyrir bringspalir Faxa, svá at sökk allt upp at skapti.

Porsheins saga Vikingssonar, chapter 23, p. 240

Thorstein realised that Faxi meant to bite his windpipe in two, and he said, ‘At what other time would I have more need for you than now, dwarf Sindri?’ With that, Thorstein became aware that something had gripped Faxi by the shoulders, so hard that the next thing was that he was down on the bottom, with Thorstein on top of him. Thorstein was very exhausted and battered from their struggle. He took the little knife that Sindri had given him, and he stabbed it just below Faxi’s ribs, so that it sank up to the hilt.

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, p. 47
They said that he wouldn't lack for entertainment, since he would die as soon as it was morning. Thorstein now thought about his situation, and it seemed to him that he was not in a good way. He said in a low voice, ‘How could I need you at any other time more than now, my comrade Sindri, if our friendship hadn’t completely ended?’ Then darkness broke out over the guards, and next they were all asleep. Thorstein saw that Sindri was coming to the rear of the ship to him. He said, ‘You’re in a bad way, Thorstein my comrade, and it’s high time to save you.’ He blew on the lock and opened it. Then he cut the bowstring from him, and Thorstein was free.

The saga tells us that Þorsteinn and Sindri parted as very good friends:
"Svá fór Þorsteinn til innar minni Brennieyjar at finna Sindra dverg ok gaf honum góðar giafir, ok skildu med inni mestu vinátu" (Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 23, p. 241); "Thorstein went to Brenmir’s smaller island to find the dwarf Sindri. He gave him good gifts, and they parted in the best of friendship" (Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, p. 48). This is not the only time in Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar when the relationship between a dwarf and a human is described as one of great friendship; the relationship between Hálfdan and Litr is another example of friendship between humans and dwarfs.
To summarise the argument so far: the dwarf’s loving and caring attitude to his own children creates a lever the human hero can use to gain the dwarf’s gratitude and help. Even if deliberate manipulation is not involved, the dwarf’s affection for his children still plays a vital part in creating a bond between human hero and dwarf. Sometimes the bond is a moral or contractual one; the adult dwarf is bound to repay the human hero for the gifts or services received by his children. Dwarfs’ behaviour towards humans is driven by both emotional or psychological motives (affection for their children) and moral obligations (the contract created when a gift is accepted).

Þorsteinn bæjarmagn may not have set out to create an obligation on the part of the dwarf – he says he is not used to accepting reward for his deeds: “er ek eigi vanr at taka mútur á afli mínu” (Porseins þáttir bæjarmagns, chapter 3, p. 401); “I’m not in the habit of taking money just for showing my talents” (Seven Viking Romances, trans. Pálsson & Edwards, p. 261) – but the moral contract mechanism nonetheless comes into play when he saves the dwarf’s child. The dwarf will not part from his benefactor without having rewarded him: “Eigi væri mér at óskyldara at launa,” segir dvergrinn; “That doesn’t make my duty to repay you any the less,” said the dwarf (ibid.).

In contrast Egill einhendi and Þorsteinn Víkingsson deliberately set out to exploit the relationship between the dwarf-father and his children; they expect a reward for their gifts to the dwarf-children. Both Egill einhendi and Þorsteinn Víkingsson may be said to have manipulated the adult dwarfs. This does not mean that Sindri the dwarf feels exploited by Þorsteinn Víkingsson; the saga characterises their relationship as one of great friendship. Having facilitated a fruitful meeting between dwarf and human hero the dwarf-children do not play any further role in either of the sagas analysed here, one might therefore conclude – albeit with a half-humorous cynicism – that dwarfs only have children so that they can be manipulated by us, humans.

A short digression is required here. If it is correct to assume that dwarfs’ families play an important role in the relationship between dwarfs and humans, we might expect to find episodes in which an adult dwarf takes revenge on a human who does something harmful his child(ren). One such episode occurs in Sigurðar saga þögla. In this saga the human Hálfdan throws a rock at dwarf’s child and breaks its jaw. When Hálfdan is asleep the dwarf-father appears to him in a dream and
reproaches and curses him for this níðingsverk. The next day Hálfdan’s brother Vilhjálmur tries to redress the wrong. He revisits the scene of the crime, where he meets the dwarf-child and gives it a gold ring. That night it is Vilhjálmur who sees the dwarf-father in a dream; he is rewarded for treating the dwarf-child so well. As Battles put it, “the episode illustrates that dwarfs’ reciprocity works both ways (as Vilhjálmur says, dwarfs are generous if treated well but vengeful if offended); [...] [the dwarf] has the power both to harm and to heal” (Battles 2005: 46). In the context of this article, it is important to stress something Battles did not consider critical, namely that Hálfdan and Vilhjálmur do not injure or give gold to the adult dwarf, but to his child. The adult dwarf’s reactions are further evidence that a dwarf’s family (dwarf-children, in particular) play an important role in relationships between humans and individual dwarfs.

We turn now to a discussion of the relationship between a human, Hálfdan, and a dwarf named Litr, in Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar. In this episode the human is described as being very good friends (vinir miklir) with the dwarf; Hálfdan addresses Litr the dwarf as fóstri and Litr addresses Hálfdan as fóstri minn.


Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar, chapters 5–6, pp. 195ff.
[...] when they came to land, Halfdan went alone from the ship, until he came to a clearing. There stood a single great stone. He went to it and knocked on it with his stick. The dwarf who had his home there, who was named Lit, came out. They were great friends. He greeted him happily and asked what his errand might be. Halfdan said, ‘I think it’s very urgent, foster-father, that you do my errand now.’ ‘What is that, foster-son?’ said Lit. ‘I want for you to get the good horn of Dis, Kol’s daughter.’ ‘You try it,’ said Lit, ‘because that will be the death of me if I try to get that. I can’t get it at all, because you know that there’s no troll like Dis in all the world.’ ‘It seems urgent now,’ said Halfdan. ‘How can I run this risk,’ said Lit, ‘even though I give my life for it?’ ‘You’ll do fine,’ said Halfdan. They parted for the time being. Halfdan went to the ship and stayed there for a while. [...] When seven nights had passed, Lit came to meet with Halfdan, and he had the horn.

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, pp. 10f.

The possible meanings of the Old Norse word fóstri include ‘foster-father’, ‘foster-son’ and ‘foster-brother’, so the addresses fóstri and fóstri mínn may be interpreted in several ways. The dwarf may have been Hálfdan’s foster-father or his foster-son, or the two may have been foster-brothers. It seems plausible to suggest that Litr the dwarf was Hálfdan’s foster-father, as Hálfdan asks for a service that is dangerous for the dwarf, and Litr is willing to risk his own life to help Hálfdan. This is also how the translators have rendered the addresses in English translations of the saga. This episode casts doubt on the widely held view that dwarfs are inferior or antagonistic to both gods and humans (see for example, Munch 1926, 1967; Motz 1993a). The relationship between Litr the dwarf and Hálfdan seems to be closer, warmer and more intimate than a relationship between an inferior and a superior, and is certainly not antagonistic. Although Litr risks his life to help Hálfdan, he does so not because he is inferior to Hálfdan, but out of love for the human, his foster-son.

All the above examples from Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar show that dwarfs are not always inferior creatures, exploited by humans. The relationship between dwarfs and humans may be a relationship between equals. In some cases, a dwarf and a human enter a ‘gift contract’; in oth-
5. How important are relationships between dwarfs and humans for the latter?

We have seen that dwarf families are of great significance in relationships between dwarfs and humans in the sagas, but before concluding this discussion it is worth considering the significance of relationships between humans and dwarfs from the human perspective. Do the human heroes actually need the dwarfs at all? The short answer is yes. Egill would not have survived had the dwarf not cured his wounds; Þorsteinn bæjarmagn would not have survived his encounter with king Geirröðr without the gifts he had received from a grateful dwarf and Þorsteinn Vikingsson would not have stood a chance in his fight against Ötunfaxi without Sindri the dwarf’s magic help and gifts. Likewise Hálfdan would not have been able to get the magic horn of Dis Karlsdóttir without help from his devoted foster-father, Litr the dwarf. As Schäfke observed: “[t]he dwarf’s help is decisive for the human actant’s later success” (Schäfke 2012: 173). Not all the sources comment on dwarfs’ size, but those that do describe them as short or small. In one instance a dwarf says explicitly to the human hero: “[L]ítil fremd er þier at briota min stuttu bein” (Samsons saga fagra, chapter 11, p. 22; “Es bringt dir nur wenig Ehre, meine kurzen Knochen zu zerbrechen”, trans. Simek, p. 99). This suggests that defeating a dwarf was not considered a heroic deed, which is consistent with Bornholdt’s assertion that dwarfs were not considered appropriate opponents for a hero and fighting them, in contrast to fighting — much larger — giants or dragons, was dishonourable, regardless of the outcome:

The few examples from the riddarasögur, though taken from a very limited corpus, reveal that defeating dwarfs, being defeated by dwarfs, and assisting dwarfs were apparently considered problematic for the Norse adaptors of the continental romances. Dwarfs are not considered appropriate opponents and a hero, as is the case in Eræx saga, can certainly not be defeated by a dwarf. Piðreks saga contains multiple
examples that illustrate how dishonourable it was to fight – and, even worse – be defeated by dwarfs. [...] While fighting and, even worse, being defeated by dwarfs is dishonourable, defeating giants (and dragons) on the other hand, is presented as one of the most heroic deeds possible; a deed that the legendary King Arthur was able to perform and the knightly hero of Tristrams saga is able to emulate.

Bornholdt 2012: 33

Bornholdt argued that dwarfs were not seen as fit opponents for a hero, yet advice, presents or other kinds of magic help from dwarfs was sometimes essential to human heroes, as the episodes discussed above illustrate. Receiving help from a dwarf did not diminish the human hero’s honour, which suggests that in the sagas the real hero was not someone who achieved heroic deeds unaided, but someone who could both give and accept help.

6 Conclusion. What can we learn about ourselves from encounters between dwarfs and humans in the sagas?

This article has shown that the image of dwarfs in the saga literature, particularly in their encounters with humans, is more complex and nuanced than some previous scholars have acknowledged. Dwarfs are not simply inferior creatures whose only function is to serve superior beings such as æsir and humans, and it is certainly not true to claim that all dwarfs are noticeably antagonistic towards humans. Dwarfs have strong emotional ties to their family (their birth children and their foster-children) and they are capable of risking their own lives to help those they love, as Litr the dwarf does when he helps Hálfdan.

Returning to the quotation which provided the stimulus for this article, “[t]here is no doubt that dwarfs have the same function as other supernatural Others, to define ourselves” (Jakobsson 2005: 69f., emphasis added), we can now venture an answer to the question of what depictions of dwarfs, and relationships between dwarfs and humans, tell us about ourselves, the mennskir menn. Relationships between dwarfs and humans tell us quite a lot about reciprocity, the importance of family and of unselfish friendship, and that these things were important at the time when fornaldarsögur and riddarasögur were told and written, just as they are
today. They also show us that humans could not always achieve their goals and perform their deeds unaided; sometimes a dwarf’s helping hand was indispensable.

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THE FAMILY LIFE OF THE DWARFS


Samandrag

Artikken handlar om tilhøve mellom dvergar og menneske i sagalitteraturen med fokus på *Egils saga eingenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Þorsteins þátr bæjaragnus* og *Þorsteins saga Vikingssonar*. Forfattaren argumenterer for at familieleivet til dvergene er viktig for tilhøvet mellom dvergar og menneske. Menneske kan manipulere vaksne dvergar ved å spele på kjærlleiken dvergene har til borna og fosterborna sine. Dette vert omtalt som psykologisk manipulasjon. Mennesket kan òg opprette ein kontrakt med dvergen ved å gje ei gave til eit dvergebarn eller gjere barnet ei tenest. Ein gjev gåver til dvergeborn heller enn til vaksne dvergar for å ikkje ri-
sikere at gåvene vert avslegne. Når dvergebarnet har teke imot gåva, vert det oppretta ein kontrakt mellom mennesket og dvergefaren, som vert forplikta til å gjere gjengjeld. Dette vert omtalt som moralsk manipulasjon. Dei to manipulasjonstypane utgjer ikkje nokon dikotomi; ein kan oftast sjå eit psykologisk og eit moralsk aspekt ved ei og same handling. Kjeldene viser at kjenslelivet til dvergane er mykje rikare og tilhøvet mellom dvergar og menneske langt meir samansett enn mange tidlegare forskarar har registrert.

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