

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 berserkjabana*, *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* 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.¹

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 berserkjabana*, *Þorsteins þáttr bæjarmagns* 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

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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 *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*. 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*,

2. Three potential exceptions to this should be noted. The first concerns Túta, the dwarf in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, a story concerned with Haraldr Harðráði's times (thanks to Prof. Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, personal communication, for drawing my attention to this fact). In the *Morkinskinna* version of the *þáttr*, Túta is described simply as "*lágr sem dvergr og digr*" (*Morkinskinna*, Vol. I, p. 273), but not explicitly referred to as a dwarf. In the *Flateyjarbók* version of the same *þáttr*, by contrast, he is called *dvergr* ("*Þat var einn dag, er menn sátu yfir borðum, at þar gekk inn i höllina dvergr einn, er Túta hét [...]*", *Sex sögu-þættir*, p. 23). Interestingly, in the *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Lit-*

Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* 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 þáttur bæjarmagns* and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*.

The rest of this article considers specific questions relevant to this

erature we find a reference to this Flateyjarbók version under “Exceptionally large or small men >> Pygmy”, rather than under “Dwarfs” (Boberg 1966: 122). The Túta episode of *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* is not considered further in this article. The second concerns Svási, Snæfriðr's father, in the *Flateyjarbók* version of the story about King Haraldr Hárfagri and the Sámi beauty Snæfriðr (and therefore relates to the times of Haraldr Hárfagri). Svási is a Sámi, but he is also called a *þotunn* in *Heimskringla*, and both a *þotunn* and a *dvergr* in *Flateyjarbók*, as Mundal (2009b) and Kusmenko (2014) have observed. Again there will be no further Svási in this article. The third exception is the several *fornaldarögur* which claim that the events described took place in King Óláfr Tryggvason's times (e.g. *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns*, *Norna-Gests þáttur*). Although King Óláfr Tryggvason's reign (995–1000) cannot be considered part of the pre-historic era, the episodes where dwarfs are involved in such *fornaldarsögur* closely resemble the other *fornaldarsögur*, rather than the allegedly historical episodes in the *konungasögur* and therefore *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* has been included in this survey.

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*, *Nítíða saga*, *Sigurðar saga þogla* and *Sírgarðs saga ok Valbrands* (Schäfke 2010: 272–75). One could also add *Norna-Gests þáttur* to this list, as in it Reginn is referred to as a dwarf (*dvergr*) and Hreiðmarr's son (*sonr Hreiðmars*). There are thus at least twelve sagas and *þættir* 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: 195f., 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 übernatürlicher Wunschdinge. Am klarsten liefert sie der Þorsteinsþáttur bæarmagns [...] Der Held trifft einen weinenden 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 Zwergenepisode 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?⁶ Consider the following sentences from *Áns saga bogsveigis*:

Án gekk í eitt skógarjörð. 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 Þórsteinssaga Víkingssonar [...], wo der Märchenzwerg als übernatürlicher 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 gewahrt und gibt ihm einen Goldring. Dies resultiert, gleichsam wie die Rettung eines Zwergemädchens [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.

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 dwarfs 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 Høðr 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 vápnlaus.'

Þá mælir Loki: 'Gerðu þó í líking annarra *manna* ok veit Baldri sœmð sem aðrir *menn*. Ek mun vísa 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 *Ans saga bogsveigis* 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 Piðriks af Bern* provide an illustration of this practice:

Vaðe risi spyr or siolande huar bua tvæir dværgar iæinu bæрге er hæitir kallava. þæsser dværgar kvnnu bætr smiða af iarne. en engi aðrer huarke dværgar ne mænzkir mænn.

Saga Piðriks af Bern, chapter 84 (58), pp. 74–75

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 þáttr* (chapter 4) Reginn is characterised as "*hverjum manni hagari ok dvergr á vöxt, vitr maðr, grimmr ok fjölkunnigr*" ("He was the most cunning of men, but a dwarf in stature, a wise man, but stern and skilled in magic", trans. Hardman).⁷ The same *þáttr* 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 *Tristrams 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; því at ek em manna mestr [...]

Tristrams 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.

Tristrams 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 þáttur eða Heðins saga ok Högna*:

Menn þeir váru í Asía, er einn hét Álfrigg, annarr Dvalinn, þriðji Berlingr, fjórði 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 þáttur eða Heðins saga ok Högna, chapter 1, p. 97

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

7. Almost verbatim in *The Elder Edda*: “Hann var hverjum manni hagari ok dvergr of vöxt. Hann var vitr, grimmr ok fjölkunnigr.” (Reginismál, p. 285).

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)

- dwarfs and the dead (Barreiro 2008)
- the origins of dwarfs (Motz 1983)

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 (Litr the dwarf helps his foster-son Hálfdan in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*; this episode is discussed later in the article).⁸

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

This article concentrates on *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*, *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana* and *Þorsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* 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.⁹ 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 málti Gestr: 'Ek hefði bedit duerg þenna, er verit befer fostri min, ath hann mundi lia þer skip vm hafit, ath sigla til þeira landa, sem ek vil þa fara, enn hann lett seint vid.' Eirekr spyr, hueria leigo hann vil epter taka. Duergrinn: 'Ef þu vil vera minnigr ok fara fram radum Gestz þessa, er mik kallar fostra sin; man þa duga ath nöckuro hofi, 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 (*Vǫluspá*, 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.¹⁰ 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 *Þjalar 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).¹¹ 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^o 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.

In *Þjalar Jóns saga* it says:

Gestr geck jnn j steinin, ok vtt litlo sidar, ok med honum duergr ok dyrgja; þau voro lag ok skamt vpp klofin, skamleit ok nasa braut. Þau heilsa Eireki konssyni, enn hann spurdi þau ath nafni. Duergr svarar: “Ek heiti Suammr, enn kerling minn Suama.”

Þjalar Jóns saga, chapter 6, p. 10

In *Bósa saga* it says:

Dugi ei mitt fylgi, þá skal dyrgja mín koma í leikinn og mun ei auðsókt, et ei nægir. [...] Kom nú dyrgja hans og kvað nú illa hafa til tekist, að dvergurinn væri sem að dauða kominn; Litur það hana ei um þat hirða, því þeir bræður hafa líf latið.

Bósa saga, chapter 6, pp. 86, 92

In *Gibbons saga* it says:

þar kom vt or eirn dvergr og heilsar a þä, enn þeir töko honum uel, enn er þeir hafa vid talast leider hann [i.e. *dvergrinn*] þa med ser jnn i berged og sau þeir þar øþru meginn dira smidiu, enn hinu megin var dyrgia dvergsins.

Gibbons saga, chapter 8, p. 37

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.

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 *durg(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 (*Herriðr*) in the sagas, albeit in a late saga (see Liberman 2002b: 261 and the reference there to Motz 1973).¹² It obvious

12. Liberman, who referred to Motz, claimed that the name *Herriðr* 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 *Herriðr* 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 *Herriðr*, found in a late saga)" (Motz 1973: 107).

that both Motz and Liberman were fully aware of the existence of Herriðr, the daughter of Sindri the dwarf in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*. 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.¹³ 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 gripí*).

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 Snæfriðr is not included in the numbers.

Egill fekk mikinn verk í höndina. En er tvær nætr váru liðnar, kom hann í höfn eina, ok lágu þar um nóttina. Gat Egill þá ekki borit af sér verkinn. Stóð hann þá upp ór sænginni, ok gekk Egill upp á skóginn. Kom hann þá at bekk einum. Þótti honum þat helzt fróit at hafa höndina niðri í læknum ok láta strauminn leika um sárit. Því næst sá Egill, út ór einum steini hvar kom eitt dvergsbarn. Þat sótti vatn í skjólu. Egill tók fingrgull af hendi sér með tönnunum ok lét reka í skjóluna fyrir barnit, en þat hljóp inn í steininn. Litlu síðar kom dvergrinn út ok spurði, hvar maðr væri, er glatt hefði barn sitt. Egill sagði til sín ok sagði sér lítit skulu gull, meðan hann væri þanninn farandi. “Þat er illt at vita,” sagði dvergrinn, “ok far með mér inn í steininn.” Egill gerði svá. Tók dvergrinn þá at binda um stúfinn, ok tók ór verk allan, ok var gróinn um morguninn. Tók dvergrinn þá at smíða honum eitt sverð, en upp frá hjöltunum gerði hann fal svá langan, at upp tók yfir olbogann, ok mátti þar spenna at, ok var Agli svá hægt at höggva með því sverði sem heil væri höndin. Dvergrinn gaf honum marga góða gripi, ok skildu þeir með vináttu.

Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana,
chapter 11, pp. 174f.

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.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 *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* in which Einarr Helgason skálaglám 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:

Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann, at ek skyld þar vaka yfir ok yrkja um skjöld hans?

Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar, chapter 78, p. 272

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

Egil's saga, trans. Pálsson, p. 218

Nevertheless, Egill made a *drápa* afterwards, and he and Einarr remained friends for the rest of their lives: "*Egill ok Einarr heldu vináttu sinni, meðan þeir lifðu báðir*" (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, chapter 78, p. 273); "*Egil and Einarr 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 skálaglám sought to ambush Egill Skalla-Grímsson; the gift is given to the child so that the adult has no opportunity to reject it, and

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

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 *Þorsteins þátrr 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.

At vári bjó Þorsteinn skip sitt. Hann hafði snekkju ok fjóra menn ok tuttugu. Ok er hann kom við Jamtaland, lá hann í höfn einn dag, ok gekk hann á land at skemmta sér. Hann kom í eitt rjóðr. Þar var einn mikill steinn. Skammt þaðan sá hann einn dverg furðuliga ljótan, ok grenjaði upp yfir sik. Sýndist Þorsteini kjaptrinn snúinn út at eyranu, en öðrum megin nefit niðr at kjaptinum. Þorsteinn segir, hví hann léti svá heimsliga. “Þú, góði maðr,” sagði hann, “undrast eigi. Sér þú eigi þann mikla örn, er þar flýgr? Hann hefir tekit son minn. Ætla ek þat, at sá ófögnuðr sé sendr af Óðni, en ek spring, ef ek missi barnit.” Þorsteinn skaut eptir erninum, ok kom undir vænginn, ok datt hann dauðr niðr, en Þorsteinn henti dvergsbarnit á lopti ok færði föðurnum, en dvergrinn varð feginn mjök ok mælti: “Þér á ek at launa lífgjöf ok sonr minn, ok kjós þér nú fyrir laun í gulli ok silfri.”

Þorsteins þátrr bæjarmagns, chapter 3, pp. 400f.

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."

Thorstein Mansion-Might, Seven Viking Romances,
trans. Pálsson & Edwards, p. 261

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 þejarmagns* 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 þáttr bæjar-magns* 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 Víkingssonar*, Sindri the dwarf has both a son, Herrauðr, and a daughter, Herriðr. 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, Herriðr, has lost her gold, and Þorsteinn 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. Herriðr 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

Síðan setti Þorsteinn fram bát ok reri til eyjarinnar. Þorsteinn gekk þar einn á land. Ok er hann kom at einum læk, sá hann, at tvau börn léku sér við lækinn, piltr ok stúlka. Þorsteinn frétti þau at nafni. Sveinninn nefndist Herrauðr, en píkan Herriðr. 'Hefi ek týnt gulli mínu,' segir hún. 'Veit ek þat muni Sindra, föður mínum, illa líka. Mun ek eiga ván hirtingar.' Þorsteinn segir: 'Hér er eitt gull, er ek vil gefa þér.' Hún tók við gullinu ok varð glöð við, – 'ok skal ek þetta fá föður mínum, eða má ek ekki þat gera, ef þér væri bati í?' 'Eigi er þat,' segir Þorsteinn, 'ok kom þú hingat föður þínum til tals við mik ok fylg svá, at hann sé í ráðum með mér um þá hluti, er mik varðar.' 'Því at eins get ek þat gert,' segir Herriðr, 'at Herrauðr, bróðir minn, fylgi mínum vilja, því at Sindri má ekki móti honum láta.' 'Veiztu þat,' segir Herrauðr, 'at ek fylgi þér um alla hluti.' Þorsteinn spretti af sér silfrbelti ok gaf honum. Þar fylgdi búinn knífr. Sveinninn mælti: 'Þetta var vel

15. Jakobsson describes Þorsteinn's behaviour as bribery: "Þorsteinn bribes the children to fetch their father, Sindri the dwarf" (Jakobsson 2008: 201).

gefit. Skal ek allan hug á leggja, at þitt mál gangi fram. Bíð hér, til þess við systkin komum aþtr.' Nú gerði Þorsteinn svá. En er stund löng var liðin, kom þar Sindri dvergr ok þau systkin með honum. Sindri heilsar Þorsteini glaðliga ok mælti: 'Hvat viltu mér, Þorsteinn?'

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 22, pp. 236f.

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 Herraud, '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.

Sindri goes on to advise Þorsteinn about tactics and strategy and then says:

Hér er einn tygilknífr, er Herraður, dóttir mín, vill gefa þér ok launa þér svá gullit, ok þat ætla ek, at hann bíti á Ötunfaxes, ef þú kemr honum hagliga við. Herraður, sonr minn, mun því launa þér beltit, at þú skalt nefna mik á nafn, ef þér þykkir nokkut á bresta. Munu vit

nú skilja fyrst at sinni, ok far þú vel ok heill. Þat mæli ek um, at mínar dísir sé þér jafnan til fylgis'

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 22, p. 237

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 *dísir* shall go with you always."

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

It seems likely that rather than meeting Herraudr 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.

Engi ráð kann ek þér at gefa,' segir Brennir, 'nema þú getir fundit Sindra dverg, því at ek veit, at honum er illa við hann, enda mun honum sízt ráðaskotr.' 'Hvert er hans at vænta?' segir Þorsteinn. 'Hann á heima í eyjunni, er hér liggr skammt undan landi, er heitir in minni Brennief. Hann býr í einum steini, en óvænligt þykki mér, at þú getir hann fundit [...].

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 22, p. 236

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 Brennief. 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 Herriðr. 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 þóttist þá vita, at Faxi ætlar at bíta 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 Faxe 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 Faxe, svá at sökk allt upp at skapti.

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, 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

Episode 2

Þeir kváðu honum óvant um skemmtun, at hann skyldi deyja þegar á morgin. Þorsteinn hugsaði nú sitt ráð ok þóttist eigi vel staddr vera. Hann mælti þá hljótt fyrir munni sér: ‘Hvat mun ek nú í annan tíma þurfa þín meir, Sindri félagi, en nú, ef eigi væri lokit allri okkar vináttu?’ Sló þá dimmu yfir varðmennina, ok því næst sofnuðu þeir allir. Þá sá Þorsteinn, hvar Sindri fór eptir skipinu ok at honum ok mælti: ‘Lítt ertu staddr nú, Þorsteinn félagi, ok mun ráð at bjarga þér.’ Hann blés upp lásinn. Síðan hjó hann af honum bogastrenginn. Var Þorsteinn þá lauss.

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 25, p. 244

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.

Saga of Thorstein Vikingsson, trans. Waggoner, p. 50

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 gjafir, ok skildu með inni mestu vináttu*” (Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapter 23, p. 241); “*Thorstein went to Brennir'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 Hálfðan and Littr 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*” (Þorsteins þáttur 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 dverggrinn; “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 þogla*. In this saga the human Hálfðan throws a rock at dwarf's child and breaks its jaw. When Hálfðan is asleep the dwarf-father appears to him in a dream and

reproaches and curses him for this *níðingsverk*. The next day Hálfðan'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 Hálfðan 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, Hálfðan, and a dwarf named Litr, in *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar*.¹⁶ In this episode the human is described as being very good friends (*vinir miklir*) with the dwarf; Hálfðan addresses Litr the dwarf as *fóstri* and Litr addresses Hálfðan as *fóstri minn*.

[...] er þeir kómu við land, gekk Hálfðan einn frá skipum, þar til hann kom í rjóðr eitt. Þar stóð steinn einn stórr. Hann gekk at honum ok klappar á með sprota sínum. Þar gekk út dvergr sá, er þar átti heima, er Litr hét. Þeir vǫru vinir miklir. Hann heilsar honum blíðliga ok fréttir, hvat at erendum væri. Hálfðan segir: 'Nú þykki mér mikit á liggja, fóstri, at þú gerir nú erendi mitt.' 'Hvat er þat fóstri minn?' segir Litr. 'Ek vilda, at þú næðir horninu góða Dísar Kolsdóttur.' 'Kosta þú,' segir Litr, 'því at þat er minn bani, ef ek leita við þat, en ek fæ þat ekki þess heldr, því at þú veizt, at ekki tröll er slíkt í veröldinni sem Dís.' 'Hér þykki mér á liggja nú,' segir Hálfðan. 'Hví mun ek þá eigi hætta,' segir Litr, 'þótt ek gefi mitt líf við?' 'Vel muntu gera,' segir Hálfðan. Skildu þeir þá at sinni. Gekk Hálfðan þá til skipa ok dvaldist þar um hríð. [...] Þá er liðnar vǫru sjau nætr, kemr Litr til móts við Hálfðan ok hefir hornit.

Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar, chapters 5–6, pp. 195ff.

[...] when they came to land, Hálfðan 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. Hálfðan 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 Hálfðan. 'How can I run this risk,' said Lit, 'even though I give my life for it?' 'You'll do fine,' said Hálfðan. They parted for the time being. Hálfðan went to the ship and stayed there for a while. [...] When seven nights had passed, Lit came to meet with Hálfðan, 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 minn* may be interpreted in several ways. The dwarf may have been Hálfðan'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 Hálfðan's foster-father, as Hálfðan asks for a service that is dangerous for the dwarf, and Litr is willing to risk his own life to help Hálfðan. 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 Hálfðan 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 Hálfðan, he does so not because he is inferior to Hálfðan, but out of love for the human, his foster-son.

All the above examples from *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* 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-

ers, the dwarf is willing to help a human because he is a good friend or part of his family. Finally, there are cases where the dwarf exacts revenge although these are not discussed in detail here, partly for reasons of space, and partly because the focus is on selected sagas. Dwarfs are not simply servants or artisans, but beings with a rich emotional life.

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 Víkingsson would not have stood a chance in his fight against Ötunfaxi without Sindri the dwarf's magic help and gifts. Likewise Hálfðan would not have been able to get the magic horn of Dís Karlsdóttir without help from his devoted foster-father, Littr 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]ítill fremd er þíer 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 *Erex saga*, can certainly not be defeated by a dwarf. *Þiðreks 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 Hálfðan.

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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Samandrag

Artikkelen handlar om tilhøve mellom dvergar og menneske i sagalitteraturen med fokus på *Egils saga einbenda ok Ásmundar berserkjabana*, *Porsteins þáttur bæjarmagns* og *Porsteins saga Víkingssonar*. Forfattaren argumenterer for at familielivet til dvergene er viktig for tilhøvet mellom dvergar og menneske. Menneske kan manipulere vaksne dvergar ved å spele på kjærleiken 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 gåve 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 dvergefare, som vert forplikta til å gjere gjengjeld. Dette vert omtalt som moralsk manipulasjon. Dei to manipulasjonstypene 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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