

The Norse Concept of Luck

Bettina Sebjerg Sommer
Copenhagen University

THE FICKLENESS OF LUCK is a standing motif in our culture. For many, luck is defined by unpredictability more than anything else. In Norse culture, the case is quite the opposite in that luck had nothing to do with what we would refer to as coincidence or chance. On the contrary, luck was a quality inherent in the man and his lineage, a part of his personality similar to his strength, intelligence, or skill with weapons, at once both the cause and the expression of the success, wealth, and power of a family. Luck expressed itself partially in skills, beauty, and other desirable characteristics, but also in events shaping themselves according to the wishes of the lucky man. One might have luck in specified areas but not in others, such as fishingluck or weatherluck for example. But the so-called "man of luck" was the man who possessed luck generally, not just in one specific area. People possessed luck in different measure and one was helpless against an opponent who had greater luck. Kings especially were great men of luck to the degree that they were able to send forth their luck to assist others. Luck was not a thing to be sought or found by coincidence; one had the luck that one was accorded by fate. Yet, in certain cases luck could be diminished or lost, a phenomenon on which I shall elaborate later.

As to the more specific details of how the notion of luck was perceived, not much is known, and scholarship on the topic has been relatively limited. I find that the view of luck as part of a man's inherent nature sets the Norse concept of luck uniquely apart from a more modern conception, and it is this aspect of luck that I will investigate in this article.

More specifically, I shall attempt to elucidate an aspect of luck that has only been touched upon by a few scholars and not for many decades: the view of Norse society on luck and the lack of it. I find that the concept of luck has certain implications for society's view of the luck-man and his counterpart, the luckless man. If luck is one of a man's personal qualities, it may possibly affect the judgment of his character. Luck may be considered not as a morally neutral factor as in modern Western society, but a requisite part of an ideal personality. Certain Norse texts seem to imply a degree of moral condemnation of the luckless man, and it is this aspect of luck—society's view of the lucky and unlucky man—that I will investigate. Was luck an essential and required part of the personality of the ideal or "heroic" male? Was the luckless man correspondingly considered morally impaired? Was there an element of condemnation attached to lucklessness?

The conception designated in modern English by the word "luck" is highly complex. This fact is reflected in the Norse terminology used to describe the various ideas of luck. The main terms are as follows: *gipta*, *gefa*, *heil*, *fylgja*, and *hamingja*. The words *audna*, *sala*, and *hugr* are also used in connection with luck but are less important to the central questions of this article. The meaning of these terms ranges from the "abstract luck-quality, inherent in a man, which he may send forth for the assistance of someone else" to a "guardian goddess of a certain family;" a diversity that witnesses the complexity of the concept of luck.

RESEARCH HISTORY

The various terms for luck figure so frequently and widely in Norse literature—predominantly in sagas—that there is no reason to doubt that luck played an important role in the culture. The question is whether we may consider our sources, which are texts written in a Christian age, to be reliable sources of pre-Christian Norse thought and religion. In this case, one may conclude that the concept at least to some degree accurately reflects a pre-Christian mode of thought since large parts of its content and use clearly do not correspond to Christian ideas and thus cannot derive from them. Though the idea of guardian spirits might be borrowed from Christianity, the idea of luck as a force emanating from a person could hardly be. I refer to Peter Hallberg for further argument that luck is a pre-Christian concept in Scandinavia (Hallberg 144, 168).

Another sign of the complexity of the luck-concept is that the scholarship touching on the subject does not focus around a central problem, but rather deals with a variety of differing questions. Wilhelm Grønbech, the Danish historian of religion, is the only scholar to investigate the concept of luck in its own right in depth. In 1931 in *The Culture of the Teutons*, he attributes major importance to luck; since his study, few scholars have touched on the subject. Grønbech has had considerable influence on international scholarship—he is referred to in the major reference works on Norse religion (e.g. Turville-Petre 328; de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* 174), and *Kultur und Religion der Germanen*, the German translation of *The Culture of the Teutons*, was reissued in 1997.

Most recently, Peter Hallberg has touched on certain aspects of the meaning of the luck-terms (he names them “fortune words,” an equally suitable translation into English) in an article that is, however, chiefly concerned with establishing fortune/luck as a Norse, pre-Christian concept. His focus is on fortune or luck as an expression of fate rather than the view of luck as part of a man’s inherent nature (Hallberg 144, 152–60).

Scholars such as Hilda Ellis Davidson, Åke Ström, Jan de Vries, Ida Blum, Nils Lid, Maj Lagerheim, and others have dealt with luck somewhat peripherally as part of a discussion of the Norse conception of the soul. These scholars are thus chiefly interested in the different guardian beings connected with the luck-terms and their relation to a man’s personality as opposed to a discussion of luck as an abstract concept and its social and ideological importance. Grønbech is in fact the only scholar who has seriously investigated this aspect of luck, and a large part of this article will accordingly be occupied with a discussion of his views.

Grønbech is clear on the topic: in dealing with society’s judgment of the luck-man and the luckless man, he defines the luck-man as the opposite of a *nidingr*. A *nidingr* is the worst possible condemnation in the Norse language. It signifies that the person is a monster, devoid of all honor, and unfit for human company. The emotional connotations of *nidingr* could perhaps be somewhat similar to how most people today feel about pedophiles. For Grønbech, a luckless man and a *nidingr* are the same thing: “Villainy, the act and state of the *niding*, is identical with lucklessness”; “the word [lucklessness] conveys a strong condemnation of the man who is denounced as being unlucky”; “lucklessness was altogether evil” (Grønbech, *Culture* 152, 153, 331). “Lucklessness” is

Grønbech's English translation of the Norse words for having no luck (*ðhapp, ðhamingja*, modern Danish *ulykke*), and I shall continue to use the same term.

Very few scholars have written about the ideas connected with the negative pole of luck. Jan de Vries briefly discusses it in *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, in which he simply refers to Grønbech and has nothing further to add. He must, thus, have been in complete agreement with Grønbech (de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* 174).

Werner Wirth and Walter Gehl have dealt with luck as part of a discussion on a Nordic belief in fate. They debate whether luck is determined by something inherent in the man or by some outer power and therefore consider examples of lucklessness and luckless men as well as comment on Grønbech as the leading scholar of this topic. Wirth agrees with Grønbech, whereas Gehl is highly critical, a fact to which I shall return later. Finally, Hallberg also has some considerations on the topic of lucklessness, to which I shall likewise return.

I find Grønbech's definition of luck-man and *nidingr* as opposites problematic and contradictory to certain sources. Other sources, however, seem to confirm his view. This fact indicates that the concept of luck has a greater complexity than Grønbech himself assumed, a factor that has never been fully described. Grønbech's opposition has never been generally employed by scholars of Norse literature and the luckless men in the sagas are not generally considered *nidingar* by literary historians. However, his view has never been directly challenged by anyone but Gehl, and de Vries's endorsement of his viewpoint stands as the last word on the matter. Society's judgment of luck is thus a question that has not been considered for many decades and which in my opinion calls for a reassessment.

THE NORSE TERMINOLOGY OF LUCK

The various terms for luck are used in a complex fashion, but not indiscriminately. There is a clear scale of meaning that stretches from "a force inherent in the man" to "guardian spirit with independent life." Some of the luck terms clearly belong to one sphere of meaning, some to the other. This scale expresses the extent to which luck is perceived as an aspect of the man himself, of his personality, or as an expression of a protective, higher power outside himself. In order to facilitate the

following discussion, I shall first examine those terms that clearly have a meaning of "abstract, inherent force."

Gefa, gipta. These words are used synonymously. They invariably refer to a force internal to the man and are never used to express an external manifestation. They may be sent forth from the owner himself to help others. Both derive from *gipt* [gift], which points toward a concept of luck as something granted from some higher power. Which power is extremely unclear, but it could be an impersonal destiny or goddesses of fate such as *norns*.

Heill is used synonymously with *gefa/gipta*, but with a connotation of omen.

Happ is also used in the same manner as *gefa/gipta*, but there is some disagreement concerning its connotations. Some believe that it stresses "lucky action" (Fritzner; Kuhn). In my opinion, the sources give us no substantial reason to believe that it is used differently from *gefa*, *gipta*, and *heill*.

Hamingja is generally synonymous with *gefa/gipta*, but differs from the terms above in being sometimes used synonymously with *fylgja*. I see no evidence in the sources to account for Wirth's attempt to attach to it a meaning different from *gefa* and *gipta* (Wirth 113) since the three words are randomly interchangeable.

Audna and *sala* are also used in connection with luck. The former has a ring of destiny, the latter of wealth. They are not used to signify luck in the sense I am investigating, and I shall not refer to them further.

These are the terms used to signify luck as an inherent force in a man. The only remaining central word connected to luck is *fylgja*—sometimes used as synonymous with *hamingja*—which is not translated as luck but which represents a category of supernatural creatures that are closely tied to a man's luck or sometimes represent it. *Fylgjur* are at the other end of the scale in that they have a Gestalt of their own, independent of their "owner." They may appear as two different types of manifestations, which, in spite of the shared name, are so different that they must be regarded as two distinct phenomena.

1. The animal-*fylgja*. This is a type of animal *Doppelgänger*, an expression of a man's self, an aspect or a part of his soul, which can be seen to wander independently of the owner, even though it does not act independently. Its nature—bear, fox, and so on—may express his personality and it reflects his physical condition: it is a bad omen to see ones *fylgja* lying dead or bloody—it never survives its owner but dies with him.

Dreamers and the second-sighted may sometimes see other people's animal-*fylgja*, which also forebodes death for the *fylgja*-owner.

Hilda Ellis finds, and I agree with her, that the concept of the animal-*fylgja* has been conflated with shape-changing, but they are two distinct ideas (Ellis 129-30). In shape-changing, the body lies unconscious while the person—the soul—wanders in animal shape. This change is the result of a conscious act of will of the shape-changer. The animal-*fylgja* is decidedly different from shape-changing in two ways. Firstly, it usually moves around while the owner's own body is conscious. Thus it is not identical to his soul, but merely an aspect or part of it. Secondly, it is not sent forth as an act of will by the owner and cannot be controlled by him.

In some sagas, there are cases of people being suddenly overcome by sleepiness after which their *fylgja* starts to wander about, or in other cases, they have a vision of someone else's *fylgja*. This experience is reminiscent of the unconsciousness of shape-changing, but these cases are exceptions to the rule.

At times the *fylgjur* seem more like literary motifs or symbols of negative human traits, such as when dreamers see the *fylgjur* of their enemies in the shape of wolves. Cases in which a hero or a highborn person is signified by a powerful *fylgja* such as a bear could possibly express an ancient Nordic idea.

2. The *fylgju*-woman. Scholars seem to agree that the so-called *fylgjukona* was originally conceptually distinct from the animal-*fylgja*, and that the two have since been mixed up.¹ The *fylgju*-woman is substantially different from the animal-*fylgja*: she is an independent creature as opposed to a *Doppelgänger* or an aspect of a man's soul. She acts and talks independently in the role of a guardian goddess and is tied to a family, not to an individual like the animal-*fylgja*. She may follow a certain individual, but after his death, she passes on to another member of the family unlike the animal-*fylgja*, who dies with the man it follows.

The *fylgju*-woman is thought to be influenced by the images of *valkyries* and *norms*, but she overlaps mainly with the *disir*, a group of goddesses who are often perceived as the female guardians of a family. The word *disir* is sometimes used synonymously with *fylgjur*. The *disir* thus represent the other extreme of the terminological scale of luck:

1. For example, see *Kulturbistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* (KLNLM) under "fylgja"; Lagerheim 182-4; Ellis 138.

they were objects of a cult and appear in every respect as external higher powers and never as a quality inherent in a man.

Fylgju-women may have been worshiped as family-*disir*, but they are not identical with the *disir*. Their differences are evident in the fact that the word *disir* may also be used with a meaning that clearly has nothing to do with *fylgjur*. Scholars generally agree that the *fylgju*-woman is the result of a mixing of two concepts: the animal-*fylgja* and the family-*disir* (see *KLNM* under *fylgja*).

Two extremes thus emerge on the terminological scale with a clear line of demarcation in the way that luck is perceived: *gefa*, *giptu*, *heill*, and *happ* on one side and *fylgja* on the other. A very revealing fact has been noted several times: a man of luck is called *heillamaðr*, *giptumaðr*, *gefumaðr*, *hamingjumaðr*, but never *fylgjumaðr* (Å. Ström 179). This fact clearly demonstrates that the *fylgja* is a concrete guardian creature and not an abstract ability. This difference is also decisively evident in that *gefa*, *gipta*, etc. may be sent forth for the aid of others, whereas the *fylgja* cannot be so controlled and only protects the family to which she is tied.

Thus we have two clearly distinct concepts of luck connected only by the term *hamingja*, which may be used in either sense. *Hamingja* is the word that bridges the otherwise clearly separate abstract and concrete words for luck.

Hamingja is to an overwhelming extent used in the abstract sense. There are only two texts in which the word is used synonymously with *fylgja*, namely *Víga-Glúm's Saga* chapter 9 and Oddr Snorrason's *Olav Tryggvasonssaga* chapter 5. Even though it would be tempting to say that these two cases are due to a misunderstanding and conclude that *hamingja* was originally a purely abstract concept unconnected with the physical *fylgjur*, it would not be permissible arbitrarily to disregard two sources. The possibility of misunderstanding must also be rejected on purely linguistic grounds in that *hamingja* is clearly connected to the word *hamr*, which is the bodily expression of a man's thought or mind, the *hugr* (de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* 222). *Hamingja* is thought to be derived from *ham-gengja* (Blum 32; de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* 222); a word that is difficult to interpret exactly, but there can be no doubt that it reflects the idea of a being that walks around in a physical Gestalt, a *hamr*.

This understanding is also the general opinion of scholars: *hamingja* is originally a physical expression of an aspect of the human personal-

ity—luck—and only later became abstract and synonymous with *gæfa* and *giptu* (Lid 138; Blum 34; Wirth III; Lagerheim 176). Many agree that it may originate in the idea of a child's foetal membrane serving as a luck-bringing guardian spirit (de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte* 224). As a term, it is well suited for bridging the abstract and the concrete ideas of luck and luck-bringing creatures since it is connected to a creature with a physical manifestation yet simultaneously expresses an aspect of the human personality.

I find that the fragmented nature of the different terms for luck indicate that the various concepts of luck are not derived from one single idea but rather that the luck terminology consists of several separate complexes of ideas that have merged and influenced one another: the guardian goddesses of the family, who are worshiped (*disir*, *fylgju*-women); luck as an aspect of one's personality, which may take physical shape and be sent forth (*hamingja*); luck as a faculty, granted to a man by some higher power (*gipta*, *gæfa*). We may assume that there existed simultaneously one idea of luck as the result of an impersonal destiny, a second of luck determined by guardian creatures and gods of fate, and yet a third of luck as a part of one's own nature. Like so many areas of Norse culture, the whole subject is fraught with uncertainty. Both types of *hamingja* are clearly strongly influenced by various traditions and often function as literary devices with a highly questionable source value. The above is merely an attempt to show that the various terms are not used indiscriminately, but that it is possible to distinguish among the meanings ascribed to them.

THE CONCEPTION OF LUCKLESSNESS AND THE LUCKLESS MAN

In the following, I shall concentrate on the antithesis of luck: lucklessness. What was society's view of the luckless man, how was he judged ideologically and morally? If luck is a quality in a man, what does a man's being luckless signify about him? Is the lucklessness due to actions committed by him; to aspects of his character; or is it simply a characteristic that is given no further explanation? Do we find a moral judgment of the luckless man? Is he by definition a *nidingr*, or can he be an admirable man and a great hero?

In *The Culture of the Teutons*, Grønbech defines the *níðingr* and thereby the luckless man as an utterly contemptible person, unfit for human society. The *níðingr* was, in Grønbech's words, "abhorrent, the most contemptible of all beings" (*Culture* 331-3). This definition of the *níðingr* is essentially in agreement with general opinion. His identification of *níðingr* and luckless man is, however, a rather drastic interpretation of lucklessness, due to Grønbech's view of luck as identical to honor, so that a man who lost his luck would also lose his honor and thereby his entire human worth (Grønbech, *Culture* 153, 251).

Grønbech's interpretation of the positive side of luck is convincing, and his account of the importance of luck is generally excellent. Although some sources do confirm his view of lucklessness, I object to Grønbech on two accounts. First: conceptions of luck were more complex and multifaceted than Grønbech assumes. Second: his identification of the *níðingr* with the luckless man is erroneous. Grønbech correctly assesses the condemnation of the *níðingr*: it was complete. A *níðingr* had no redeeming qualities. In my opinion, the sources show that *níðingr* and luckless man were overlapping but not identical terms. A *níðingr* would undoubtedly lose his honor and his luck, but the reverse was not necessarily true. Several sources show us that it was clearly possible to be a luckless man and simultaneously retain one's honor and all the qualities that defined an excellent and admirable man (henceforth referred to as a hero).

We have a clear example of this situation in *Laxdæla* saga chapter 58: "Grímr sagði ærin sín óhöpp" (173) [Grímr said that he had worked sufficient lucklessness].² Later in the same chapter Snorri says about Grímr: "Lízk mér giptusamliga á Grím" (174) [Grímr seems to me to be a man whom luck will follow]. *Óhapp* here is clearly not equivalent to either being a luckless man or to *níðings-verk*: an action that designates the performer a *níðingr*.

Another example occurs in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, where the death of Hákon jarl is due to "ina mestu óhamingju" (299) [the greatest lucklessness]. Nonetheless, Hákon possessed every characteristic of a hero, including luck to win victory and kill his enemies. Hákon ends his life as a luckless man, but is still considered an admirable man by the author. His enemies, the peasant army, calls him a *níðingr*, but this is clearly not

2. All translations from Old Icelandic are my own.

the opinion of the author, who recites a poem of homage to the earl and indicates that the cause of his lucklessness was that the time of the true faith had arrived, a factor clearly overriding the luck of any pagan.

In chapter 120 of *Njáls Saga*, Skarpheðinn is referred to as a luckless man by several characters, and this fact is used by Grønbech as evidence to support his theory (*Culture* 156–7). Paradoxically, this text actually shows Grønbech to be mistaken, since Skarpheðinn is clearly not a *niðingr*. In the same breath, he is called both a luckless man and a man so resolute and excellent in manly pursuits that the speaker would choose him alone as a companion rather than ten other men together. One does not praise a *niðingr* this way: in essence, the chapter describes Skarpheðinn both as a luckless man and as the greatest and bravest warrior of all. Grønbech sees this praise of course but argues that the meaning of the words has changed and that they have lost their real significance to the speaker. His rhetorical strategy is ultimately unacceptable as it creates an untenable argument that merely restates the source in terms of its exact opposite. Here Grønbech argues against his source and not in accordance with it.

Finally we have the most obvious examples, Gísli Súrsson and Grettir Ásmundarson. They are both clearly luckless men but simultaneously possess many of the qualities that define a hero. No one could be further from being a *niðingr* than Gísli. In chapter 36 of the saga, he is characterized with these words: “hann hefir inn mesti hreystimaðr verit þó at hann væri eigi I öllum hlutum gæfumaðr” (115) [he has been the bravest man, though not in everything a luck-man]. Similarly in chapter 27: “eigi hefir meiri atgörvimaðr verit en Gísli né fullhugi, en þó varð hann eigi gæfumaðr” (88) [Never was there a more able man than Gísli or a braver one and yet he was not a man of luck]. These quotations alone ought to refute Grønbech’s interpretation.

In the case of Grettir, other explanations for the lucklessness are given, and I shall return to these later. Here also it is clear that one may simultaneously be a luckless man and have honor and respect, as seen in this quotation from chapter 52: “hann er maðr frægr ok stórættaðr, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr” (169) [he is a famous man and of great lineage even though he is no man of luck]. He is also referred to as the bravest man who ever lived on Iceland and is consistently described as a great hero who performs good deeds such as cleansing the land of trolls and ghosts. Grønbech insists that Grettir is a *niðingr*. He seems to be of the opinion that Grettir is admired initially but then gradually

slides into the status of a *nidingr* (Grønbech, *Culture* 337–8). This strategy would be the only way of reconciling the saga's positive view on Grettir, which Grønbech does not deny, with Grønbech's own description of the complete condemnation of the *nidingr*: "He has no honor.... He becomes a coward and he grows malicious" (*Culture* 328). And: "The man of lucklessness is regarded with the same mixture of hate, contempt and horror as the real giants of Utgard, for no other reason than that he belongs to the host of the monsters" (*Culture* 333).

At no point is this description true of Grettir. He is admired and admirable unto death and beyond. His killers, on the contrary, are judged with the harshest condemnation: the saga's author eventually proclaims them—and not the luckless Grettir—*nidingar*. Other examples could be given, but I consider these sufficient to disprove Grønbech's position. His opinion of the quotations given above seems to be that these sources represent a later development and a diluting of the original way of thinking. This is an unacceptable argument that arbitrarily dismisses sources that do not fit his theory (Grønbech *Culture* 150, 153, 157). The sources contradicting Grønbech are too numerous to be dismissed as exemptions, and there is no reason to assume them to be less "original" than the sources upon which Grønbech bases his interpretation.

The attitude toward lucklessness as a despicable state, considered by Grønbech as the original one, is also to be found in some sources. Grønbech uses as evidence a quotation from *Gísli* 32, in which, as Grønbech says: "lucklessness and villainy are used alternately with equal force" (*Culture* 152). Eyjólfur is going to kill Gísli's wife Auðr, but this act is prevented by Hávarðr. This killing is called first *nidingsverk* [villainy] and then *óhappi*. In this case, Grønbech is right: the word for lucklessness/unlucky deed is here synonymous with the action, which makes a man a *nidingr*. This example is used by Walter Gehl in his critique of Grønbech in which he claims that *happ* is unique among the terms for luck in having an ethical connotation (Gehl 71–5). According to Gehl, *óhapp* fits Grønbech's theory but has nothing to do with other words for luck such as *gefa*, *gipta*, and *hamingja*, which renders it useless as evidence of a theory on the concept of luck. However, all dictionaries, with the possible exception of Cleasby Vigfusson, disagree with Gehl.³

3. See Baetke; Cleasby/Vigfusson; Heggstad; Zoëga; Fritzner; Kuhn; de Vries *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*.

Furthermore, Gehl is contradicted by the sources that use *happ* indiscriminately with the other words for luck, such as *Vatnsdæla saga*.

Even though chapter 32 of *Gísli* shows that *óhapp* and *níðingsverk* may be used synonymously, this example also disproves Grønbech's claim of an undeniable connection between lucklessness and *níðingsverk*, since it is Eyjólfur who wants to commit the crime and he is not luckless. In this quotation, there is actually no connection between the performing of *níðingsverk* and being struck by lucklessness. There are other examples of moral condemnation of the luckless man, such as *Vatnsdæla saga* 24, wherein Geirmundr says to Hrolleifr: "Þat sé ek, at þú ert inn verstí óhappamaðr, ok far á brottu, in vándra mannfýla ok kom hér aldri" (64) [I see that you are the worst luckless man, be gone you wretched scum and never come back]. Even though these examples use *óhappamaðr* with all the disgust and condemnation of which Grønbech speaks, they are not numerous enough to justify viewing this attitude as original and exclusive.

So far we have seen that the attitude toward the luckless man was more complex than Grønbech assumed. Luckless man and *níðingr* are terms that in some cases overlap, but that are not identical or invariably connected. Hallberg reaches a similar conclusion in that he finds that *ógefa* and *óhamingja* seem sometimes not to refer to a man's general quality, but to isolated incidents of misfortune that do not affect the overall judgment of a man (Hallberg 155-9).

The sources do, however, give the consistent impression that the excellent, admirable man would normally also be a luck-man, and when he is not, it appears to be an anomaly that requires an explanation. The wretched end of so eminent a man as Hákon Jarl is obviously a source of wonder to the author of the *Heimskringla*. He searches for an explanation and eventually settles on the coming of the true faith and the end of pagan men.

Similarly, the fact that their admired heroes are not luck-men seems to cause the authors of the sagas of *Gísli* and *Grettir* to wonder. In the above quotations, the words *en þó* and *þó at* [yet, even though] seem to indicate that this is not a normal state of affairs. In both of the sagas, lucklessness is explicitly explained by *seiðr* [witchcraft] and in *Grettir's* case with a curse cast by a ghost. These reasons are clearly an attempt by the authors to explain an otherwise incomprehensible factor, and I shall later investigate whether this approach accurately reflects a Norse view of luck. In the following I shall examine some cases of this

anomaly—that a brilliant and admirable man is a luckless man—and I shall investigate how this circumstance might be explained and how the luckless man was regarded.

VARIOUS EXPLANATIONS OF LUCKLESSNESS

The following causes of lucklessness are not the only possible ones but are the most common and sufficiently representative of the various views on luck.⁴

An External Factor, beyond the Power of the Hero

To this category belong the three cases above: *seiðr* in the cases of Gísli and Grettir and the will of God in the case of Hákon Jarl. The latter must be considered pure Christian rationalization. As to Gísli, even if this explanation is a later addition, the idea that anyone might be struck by lucklessness through *seiðr* is quite likely to be genuinely Norse. Such a notion would be in keeping with the general conception of *seiðr* as an evil, dreaded form of witchcraft. Whether this view of *seiðr* is original or distorted by Christianity is in itself a disputed issue to which I cannot attend here. In Grettir's case, the theme of witchcraft and a curse as the cause of lucklessness is well integrated by the author, but this fact does not necessarily make it a credible source of Norse thinking. I shall return to this later and examine other possible causes of Gísli's and Grettir's lucklessness as well.

Kin Slaying and Other Forms of Niðingsverk

The thought that kin slaying would in itself cause lucklessness is attested by the overwhelming importance of the family in Norse culture. Breaking the family bond of *fríðr* [peace] was a disastrous act that would automatically have a calamitous effect. This fact is implied in the "Völuspá," in which fratricide is one of the defining characteristics of *Ragnarök* and perhaps even the cause of it (i.e. the murder of Baldr by his brother).⁵ I find that the most obvious interpretation of Gísli's case is that his killing

4. Luck may reside in certain objects, for example, and be lost when they are lost, as in *Víga-Glúms saga*.

5. Stanzas 43–4 in *Codex Regius* and 37–8 in *Hauksbok*. As with almost everything in *Völuspá*, the exact interpretation is unclear.

of his brother-in-law is the real cause of his lucklessness. Folke Ström suggests that the cause is Gísli's sacrilege in killing during a sacred time ("Gudarnas vrede" 15), an explanation that I find possible but less likely. I also believe that the likeliest cause of Skarphedinn's lucklessness is his and his brothers' killing of their foster brother Höskuldr.

The aforementioned chapter 32 of *Gísli* suggests that other forms of *nidingsverk* were also thought to cause both moral condemnation and lucklessness for the culprit. This suggestion brings us back to Grønbech's thesis and to the question of why Gísli is clearly not condemned for his action. In my opinion, Gísli is no *nidingr* for the reason that his actions are forced by other, equally compelling demands of honor and family bonds. These considerations are the only imaginable excuses and free him from the authorial condemnation of the charge of being a *nidingr*. It does not however free him from the lucklessness that must follow from the action itself independent of intent and reasons. Gísli is an exception to the rule: normally *nidingsverk* was followed by the sharpest condemnation, and Gísli's rescue from this judgment is due only to his performance of the proper act according to the code of honor even though it necessarily leads to his destruction.

Nið as the Cause of Lucklessness

Nið is in itself an intricate problem in Norse culture, and I have therefore chosen to discuss it separately even though it has affinities with both the categories above. *Nið* is relevant to this discussion due to a connection between *nið* and lucklessness that is indicated by *Egils saga* in chapters 56 and 57, in which Egill erects a *nið*-pole and composes two *nið*-verses against his enemy Eiríkr Bloodaxe. This ritual later causes Eiríkr to be exiled from Norway: the *nið*-pole may therefore be said to rob Eiríkr of his luck. Furthermore, *nið* may be assumed for linguistic reasons to be in some way connected to *nidingr*, and if *nið* were connected to lucklessness, it could therefore also indicate a link between lucklessness and status of *nidingr*. For a more thorough discussion of Egil's *nið*-pole and verses, I refer especially to Bo Almqvist's *Norrøn niddiktning I*.⁶

Another problem concerning *nið* is whether it was perceived as ritually efficacious in damaging its victim or functioned exclusively as an

6. Almqvist 94–118; see also F. Ström, "Nid, Ergi" 18; F. Ström, "Gudarnas vrede" 23; Meulengracht Sørensen 39; furthermore *Reallexicon der germanischen Altertumskunde* and *KLNM* under "nið."

insult. It is possible that the latter could sometimes be the case, but in the case of "erected *nið*"—the insulting words being accompanied by a *nið*-pole or wooden sculpture—there can be no doubt that *nið* has a ritual purpose. A detailed discussion is not possible here, but I again refer to Almqvist who also concludes that *nið*-poles are most intimately connected to magic and pagan cults.⁷

On the basis of these arguments, I conclude that the *nið*-passage in *Egils Saga* shows that *nið* was in some cases a ritual with the purpose of robbing an enemy of his luck. This fact is especially interesting since the verses in chapters 56 and 57 are considered to have been composed by Egill himself and are thus a pre-Christian source to the perception of *nið*.

In relation to my investigation of the view on the luckless man, the question then is: what does *nið* imply about its victim? Though the exact relationship between *nið* and *niðingr* is unknown, it is not unreasonable to assume that the accusations directed at the victim of *nið* were such as to brand him as a *niðingr* (Almqvist 74; Meulengracht Sørensen 38).

In the *nið*-verses in chapters 56 and 57, Egill calls down the anger of certain higher powers on his enemies.⁸ In addition to various insults, Egill directs two accusations against Eiríkr Bloodaxe that specifically refer to actions described in the immediately preceding narrative: firstly he is "vé grandar" [despoiler of the sacred]. This characterization refers to Eirík and Gunnhild's breaking of the *þing*-peace in cutting the sacred ropes encircling *Þingvellir*. Such a transgression is sacrilege since the area and peace of the *þing* were sacred and protected by the gods: breaking the *vé*-ropes was an insult to the gods themselves. It is in all probability this action that enables Egill to awaken the wrath of divine powers toward Eiríkr and Gunnhildr through his *nið* ritual. Norse gods are generally considered unconcerned with human justice, but their anger was aroused by an insult to them personally (F. Ström, *Gudarnas vrede* 13, 19–21).

Egill's other accusation is fratricide, an obvious *niðingsverk* that according to my previous examples ought to cause the loss of luck by Eiríkr independent of Egill's *nið*. We may of course here have a different perception of lucklessness, in which lucklessness is not caused

7. See KLNK and *Reallexicon der germanischen Altertumskunde* under "nið," for a definition of erected *nið* and "tongue-*nið*."

8. Almqvist 107; see also F. Ström, "Gudarnas vrede" 23.

directly by the committing of *nidingsverk*, but by the *níð* ritual. But Egil's intention in including this scene may also simply be to brand his enemy as a *níðingr*, one who deserves to be a social outcast since this is an absolutely essential element of *níð*. The most common reason for ostracism associated with *níð* is *ergi* [unmanliness], especially in the form of cowardice and passive male homosexuality. This is one offence of which Eiríkr is not guilty and Egill therefore turns to the fratricide to be able to include the social condemnation without which his *níð* would be incomplete.

In *Gísli saga* chapter 2 and *Vatnsdæla saga* chapter 33 the victim's cowardice (*ergi*) is the immediate cause of the *níð*. It is unlikely that *ergi* would lead to retaliation from the divine powers, but it would in itself lead to a form of loss of luck in that a man who has lost his honor and the respect of his peers is naturally not a lucky man.

In *Vatnsdæla saga*, the anger of the *goðar* is again invoked against the victim. We again find two components of the *níð*: social ostracism—"being every man's *níðingr*"—and the invocation of the gods' anger with an accusation of being a *gríðnir*, that is a breaker of a peace or agreement. The latter at once brands the victims as *níðingar* and motivates the wrath of the gods since peace breaking is also sacrilege (Markey 11). In *Vatnsdæla saga*, the two components of the *níð* again combine to make the loss of luck of the victim complete.

To conclude, *níð* may destroy the luck of the victim on two levels: both socially and with regard to divine powers. In *Egils saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, the luck-destroying *níð* is connected to various forms of *nidingsverk*, for example cowardice and peace breaking. The *níð* makes its victim "every man's *níðingr*," the object of a strong social condemnation that is an essential part—some say the essential and original part—of *níð*. The invocation of the wrath of higher powers is not always present, but strengthens the loss of luck. One may conclude that insofar as one's lucklessness is caused by *níð*, one is a *níðingr* and that in such cases Grønbech's theory is correct.

So far I have shown examples of lucklessness caused by magic, sacrilege, and *nidingsverk*, especially slaying kin and *ergi*. I find no reason not to consider these ideas as mainly pre-Christian. These causes, with the exception of the first, all implicate a degree of condemnation of the luckless man. As I have shown, however, the condemnation was not as unequivocal as Grønbech claims. Some of the aforementioned characters such as Grettir and Skarpheðinn however, possess certain

characteristics that seem connected to their lack of luck and that may indicate a condemnation of this lucklessness. This is the question I shall now examine.

Flaw of Character as a Cause of Lucklessness

In *Grettirs saga*, there are several times that flaws in Grettir's character are used explicitly by the author to explain his lack of luck, such as when his over-confidence is pointed out in chapter 28. He believes himself capable of anything, which leads him to seek out the ghost Glámr, who casts the curse on him that directly occasions his lucklessness. I feel, however, that the saga's view of over-confidence as a form of hubris, which strikes Grettir, can hardly express Norse thinking. Throughout the saga Grettir conquers his enemies and is therein not over-confident according to Norse thinking, but deserving of the highest praise.

The lack of luck is also explained by other character flaws, mainly quarrelsomeness and lack of self-control.⁹ It is not unreasonable to assume that to Norse thought lucklessness might be the result of possessing a nature that relentlessly drives one toward disaster. Nonetheless in Grettir's case, this idea seems colored by a Christian view of sin and individual choice between sin and virtue. Since *Grettirs saga* is the last of the great sagas, written circa 1300–1325, the Christian influence is obvious throughout, and one cannot on the grounds of this saga alone conclude that there was a Norse idea of a man's fate driving him to lucklessness on the basis of his own nature.

Even if this situation were the case, we would have to conclude that a disposition that alienates others is unlucky, whereas it is a gift to possess a pleasant, sociable nature. This experience is too general to claim as particularly Norse. In my view, Grettir's flaws are not due to any Norse idea of luck, but rather are the author's attempt to explain the lucklessness of his hero. He utilizes certain undesirable characteristics as well as stories about Grettir's childhood, which include folkloric motives about the unpromising hero.

Skarpheðinn has certain similarities with Grettir. In *Njáls saga* chapter 100, his lucklessness seems to consist of his difficult, quarrelsome nature,

9. E.g. chapters 31, 35, and 39 of *Grettirs saga*.

10. For reasons of brevity I have chosen not to include any such cases, since I find them of limited value to the present discussion.

which repels people and makes enemies of everyone he meets. I see the real cause of his lucklessness as the killing of Höskuldr. Perhaps his lucklessness has no definite cause and is simply a result of his personal fate, something that is also found in some cases.¹⁰ This view of character flaws in both these sagas expresses a general attitude toward the male ideal. It involves the admiration of the brave, strong, and heroic man who deserves honor and fame. It is nonetheless a flaw if he does not also possess the self-control and the will to strive for peace that is characteristic of flawless heroes such as Gunnarr of Hlíðarenði.

Gísli is the luckless man who most closely resembles the blameless hero who is struck by lucklessness. I believe that the cause of his lucklessness is the slaying of kin, but this cause must have been insufficient to the saga writer since he finds it necessary to evoke *seiðr* as the reason. It is of course possible that this trait is original since *seiðr* as a destructive magic is found in several sources including in *Egils saga*.

I conclude, therefore, that flaws of character cannot be the cause of lucklessness in Norse thinking, but that in certain cases they are used by the authors of sagas to create psychological portraits or through their example to throw the ideal man into relief. Ultimately they fail to reflect a negative view of the luckless man.

CONCLUSION

As regards the view of Norse society on luck and the question of condemnation of the luckless man, I conclude that most of the causes of lucklessness examined here are connected with some transgression on the part of the luckless one. Recurring causes of lucklessness include kin-slaying, sacrilege, oath- and peace-breaking, and *níðingsverk*, all of which would likely give rise to a degree of condemnation. We do, however, find certain causes of lucklessness that are entirely independent of one's own actions: *seiðr*, curses, or a lucklessness were simply accorded by fate.

The natural state of affairs was that a hero was a man of luck. Specific cases of the opposite were a source of wonder and required—and usually found—an explanation among those mentioned above. In spite of this fact, condemnation is attached to lucklessness only in some cases, but not in others.

The concept of lucklessness in the sources is complex and reflects not one, but various attitudes. Even where some degree of condemnation

is implied, its strength varies. First, we find the state that Grønbech discusses in which the unlucky man is a *níðingr*. Second, we find instances of lucklessness seen as a flaw, a lack, and something to avoid, but with none of the absolute condemnations characteristic of the *níðingr*-concept. Third, we find cases of no condemnation at all, such as *Laxdæla saga* chapter 58. And finally there are certain luckless men, such as Gísli, who are struck by the relentless lack of luck but are free of condemnation because their action is ruled by fate. Lucklessness, then, is often connected with contemptible actions and to some degree a reprehensible state, but this association is by no means necessary. The attitude toward lucklessness depicted by Grønbech existed, but it was not the only possible attitude, and there is no reason to assume that one attitude was more original than the others. Grønbech errs in defining luck-man and *níðingr* as stark opposites: the status of *níðingr* was no automatic consequence of loss of luck, but had a narrower and more specific meaning.

The concepts of luck and the loss of luck were complex, and Norse thought had no single, unanimous view on what might be the cause of lucklessness. Furthermore, the attitude toward luck reflects aspects of the Norse conceptualization of a range of topics such as ritual remedies against enemies, the relationship with the powers, and the ideal man. It does not consist of one clearly defined idea, but is rather a multifaceted concept reflecting several co-existing views on luck that have grown out of a range of different ideas and merged in a complex fashion. However, I hope to have shown that it is not impossible to discern its various facets.

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