



## THE REPRESENTATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN OLD NORSE LITERATURE AND LAW

Eski İskandinav Edebiyatında ve Hukukunda Eşcinselliğin Temsili

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### ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to examine the evidence for homosexuality among the early medieval Scandinavian peoples, popularly known as the Vikings. A variety of literary, legal, and religious sources from medieval Iceland and Norway provide an indirect window on Viking attitudes towards homosexuality. These include sagas such as Njal's Saga, Ljósvetninga Saga, Kristni Saga, Gísla Saga, Biskupa Sögur Íslenska Bókmenntafélag, and Fóstbræðra Saga along with the Eddaic poems Lokasenna and Brymskviða. This literary testimony may be supplemented by evidence from the Law of Gulathing and the Gray Goose Laws (Gragas), as well as *Staðarhólsbók* and the *Icelandic Homily Book*. Homosexuality was termed "nið" in Old Norse and the term varies according to certain actions or behaviour. In the sagas, the word "nið" was used in several ways with different meanings, to denote a coward, sexual pervert, or a homosexual. The word was mostly used in the meaning of coward and homosexual which were more or less synonymous for the Vikings.

**Keywords:** The Vikings, Nið, homosexuality, gender roles, Viking literature, Viking law.

### ÖZ

Bu makale, popüler olarak Vikingler olarak bilinen erken Ortaçağ İskandinav halkları arasındaki eşcinselliğin kanıtlarını incelemeyi önermektedir. Ortaçağ'dan kalan İzlanda ve Norveç'ten çeşitli edebi, yasal ve dini kaynaklar, Vikinglerin eşcinselliğe yönelik tutumlarına dolaylı bir pencere sunmaktadır. Bunlar arasında Njal's Saga, Ljósvetninga Saga, Kristni Saga, Gísla Saga, Biskupa Sögur Íslenska Bókmenntafélag ve Fóstbræðra Saga gibi destanların yanı sıra Eddaic şiirleri Lokasenna ve Brymskviða yer almaktadır. Bu edebi tanıklık, Gulathing Yasası ve Gray Goose Yasaları'nın (Gragas) yanı sıra *Staðarhólsbók* ve *Icelandic Homily Book*'dan gelen kanıtlarla desteklenmektedir. Eşcinsellik Eski İskandinav dilinde "nið" olarak adlandırılmaktadır ve bu terim belirli eylemlere veya davranışlara göre değişmektedir. Des-

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tanlarda “nið” kelimesi bir korkak, cinsel sapık ya da bir eşcinsel olduğunu belirtmek için farklı anlamlarla çeşitli şekillerde kullanılmıştır. Kelime çoğunlukla Vikingler için aşağı yukarı eşanlamli olan korkak ve eşcinsel anlamında kullanılmıştır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Vikingler, Nið, eşcinsellik, cinsiyet rolleri, Viking edebiyatı, Viking hukuku.

### **Homosexuality in Literature: The Sagas**

Homosexuality has always been a big issue not only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but also in early medieval and medieval times. Even if the concept of homosexuality varies today, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer etc. in the Vikings literature and law, there is only one concept that was highly stressed which is the male-male sexual relationship. The reason is related to masculinity. Gender roles were highly significant in the Vikings since, “they have been defined according to their, mainly, masculine roles as pirates, robbers, seafarers, warriors, and merchants.” (Judith, 2015: 87). There were certain medieval Scandinavian sex roles, in women’s case those were child caring, cooking, serving and doing other housework, but the case was quite different for men. Men were dealing with travel, politics, law, fishing, agriculture and so on. In that sense, the expected attitude towards homosexuality or effeminacy was certain. In Scandinavian sagas, there were many pieces of evidence that prove the existence of homosexuality in the Vikings age. In Old Norse, the word nið<sup>1</sup> is seen in law codes and literature which means to insult in the meaning of cowardice, homosexuality, or sexual perversion. Nið also used to insult men in the Vikings society. In sagas, there are many examples of nið used as a way of insulting a man or in the meaning of homosexual.

In Njal’s saga, there is an argument between Flosi and Skarphedinn. Skarphedinn says, “Flosi that thou art the sweetheart of the Swinefell’s goblin, if, as men say, he does indeed turn thee into a woman every ninth night.” (URL-6). Skarphedinn accuses Flosi of having sexual intercourse with a goblin. He claims that he is no man and insults his masculinity, which

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<sup>1</sup> A man’s honour was based on his masculine behaviour, and being masculine was a very significant aspect for the Vikings. If a man was a coward or deviated from expected masculine behaviour, he was seen as making nið. Gender roles and also sexual roles were very significant, especially for men. Even if there is some evidence for women behaving or dressing like men, most sagas and laws focus on certain behaviour prohibited for men. Any effeminate behaviour was considered to be an insult to a man’s honour.

was forbidden in the law and will be explained in more detail in the following part.

Representation of a woman in male clothes is more common in poems, but it is hard to see the representation of a man in female clothes. In the Eddaic poem, *Þrymskviða*, Thorr who represents the male masculinity, needs to dress like a woman in order to get his hammer back.

Látum und hánnum hrynja lukla ok kvenváðir um kné falla, en á brjósti breiða steina ok hagliga um höfuð typpum. Þá kvað þat Þór, þrúðugr áss: “Mik munu æsir argan kalla, ef ek bindask læt brúðarlíni!”<sup>2</sup> (URL-5).

In the poem, the usage of the words shows that Thorr needs to wear fancy jewellery, and he has breasts. The word breast is used for women’s chests. Here the description of Thorr is womanly. The word *argr* (*argan*) is used in the poem, which means a man who is sexually used by another man willingly. Here Thorr criticises men in a bridal gown, so he criticises effeminacy, and he says that if he wears women’s clothes, he will call himself *argr*. Another example is Odinn’s accusation of Loki in the Eddaic poem *Lokasenna*.

Óðinn kvað: “Veiztu, ef ek gaf, þeim er ek gefa né skylda, inum slævurum, sigr, átta vetr vartu fyr jörð neðan, kýr mólkandi ok kona, ok hefr þú þar börn borit, ok hugða ek þat args aðal.”<sup>3</sup> (URL-4).

Odinn here accuses Loki of being in the underworld for eight winters. For hiding himself, he becomes a coward and is likened to a woman because of his cowardice. Making *nið* means both being effeminate and coward or homosexual. Here, in the poem, since Loki was seen as a coward, he was accused of being effeminate. In *Lokasenna*, God Njordr was accused of having sexual intercourse with giants, and drinking urine.

Loki kvað: Þegi þú, Njörðr, þú vart austr heðan gíls of sendr at goðum; Hymis meyjar höfðu þik at hlandtrogi ok þér i munn migu.<sup>4</sup> (URL-4).

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<sup>2</sup> Then, Thor the mighty made his answer, “Me would the gods, unmanly call if I let bind the bridal veil”.

<sup>3</sup> Odin spoke: “Though I gave to him, who deserved not the gift, to the baser, the battle’s prize; winters eight wast thou under the earth, milking the cows as a maid (Ay, and babes didst thou bear; unmanly thy soul must seem).”

<sup>4</sup> Shut up, Njörðr, east from here, you were sent to the gods as a hostage Hymir’s maids had you as a piss-trough and urinated in your mouth.

In the poem, Njordr was accused of having sex with giants and there is a sexual connotation. Giants are huge and masculine creatures, and Loki's statement shows that Njordr was sexually used by the Giants. The evidence is that he drank urine which cannot be done voluntarily, or since he was the submissive one, he obeyed what was said.

In the stanza, there is another concept that Njordr's action shows that he might be into BDSM. Since he was used by giants and the girls pissed in his mouth, he was the submissive one. His submission shows the fact that he was effeminate, and since he was both into giants and did not stop girls to piss his mouth, he is bisexual and is into BDSM. In the concept of BDSM, one does not need to have sexual intercourse but can enjoy other things in a sexual manner, as it was stated in the stanza.

The concept of nið as a way of insulting comes across in *Ljósvetninga saga*. In the saga, Þorkell says that Guðmundr is argr, so he is sexually used by a man willingly. Guðmundr attacks Þorkell and kills him, but before killing him, he says that,

Það sá Þorkell og hló að og mælti: “Nú kveð eg rassinn þinn hafi áður leitað flestra lækjanna annarra en mjólkina hygg eg hann eigi fyrr drukkið hafa.”<sup>5</sup> (URL-3).

He claims that Guðmundr's arse is not thirsty anymore because it had so many sources before, and they are not drunk milk. What he means here is that they were not drunk because he submitted himself voluntarily so he wanted to be sexually used by men, and the men were in conscious, so they knew what they were doing. What Guðmundr here likens is milk to sperm since he says that Þorkell arse is not thirsty anymore which is an indication of accusing Þorkell of being argr and he had enough milk to satisfy himself.

The same concept of humiliation and homosexual intercourse are seen in *Kristni saga*. “Hefir born borit/biskup niu/þeirra er allra/Þorvaldr faðir.”<sup>6</sup> (Sigurðsson and Vigfússon, 1858: 45). Here, Þorvaldr is accused of having sexual intercourse with the bishop, and they had nine children together. In pagan belief, the dominant one in a homosexual intercourse was not seen argr, but in Christian belief, both dominant and submissive one is accused of being argr, so in this case both the bishop and Þorvaldr were seen as homosexuals.

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<sup>5</sup> Þorkell saw this and laughed and said: Now I say, your ass has sought most of the streams other than the milk, but I do not think he drunk the milk before.

<sup>6</sup> Children were born, bishop nine, theirs is everyone's, Þorvaldr father.

In Gísla saga, Gísli and Þorgrimir were seen while playing with a ball. The problem is that in the dialogue between Gísli and Þorgrimir, there are strong sexual connotations. “Geirr í gumna sárum gnast; kannkat þat lasta. Böllr á byrðar stalli brast; kannkat þat lasta.” (URL-1). To begin with, byrðar means load, and byrðar stalli means load’s support. The sentence is translated into English as “the ball struck hard upon the shoulders.” (Sørensen, 1983: 66). The sexual connotation infers that there is sexual activity between Gísli and Þorgrimir and most probably oral sex because the ball faces with the shoulders. Böllr has the meaning of ball, but it is used for the penis as well. Byrðar also may have been used as sperm since it was translated as the load, so at the end of the play, he released his load. Þorgrimir is the argr one who was used sexually by Gísli.

In Fóstbræðra saga, there is a fight between Falgeirr and Þormoðr. The representation of homosexuality in the fight scene is quite contradictive. Even though it seems to be just a fight between two men in the original text, modern English translation has strong sexual connotations.

Skopta ek enn þa er vppi vndarlings a svnd-hrokr do heimskr vid kleki hans razaklof gandi; alla leit ek a ulli eggvedvrs hvgar glogvm setti gaur ok glott. Gufidon vid mer sionir. (Gíslason, 1852).

In the stanza, Þormoðr is fighting with Falgeirr and moving back and forth. It is translated into English as “I was moving constantly back and forth, when his arse gaped strangely above the water.” (Sørensen, 1983: 73) There is a certain concept of nið in the stanza. Þormoðr is having anal intercourse with Falgeirr. There is a detailed description in the saga that anal gaping and moving back and forth show the fact that Falgeirr is the submissive and effeminate (argr) one.

In Scandinavian societies, there are few pieces of evidence on homosexuality and after interpreting the literary sources. The concept of nið was seen in many sagas which shows the fact that homosexuality was something humiliating both in the meaning of cowardice and effeminacy.

### **Homosexuality in the Viking Law**

As in Vikings literature, the concept of nið was used in law as well. In the Law of Gulathing, there is a certain passage that is related to the usage of nið as an insult. In Njal’s saga, Flosi was insulted by Skarphedinn, so he made nið against Flosi. According to the law of Gulathing, it is stated that “nobody is to make verbal nið about another person and if he becomes known for this and is found guilty of it, his penalty is outlawry.” (Sørensen,

1983: 15). The offence crime varies, and the punishment was given according to the severity of the offence. The penalty that was written in the Law of Gulathing, which was outlawry, equals to the death sentence. The severity of the punishment shows the fact that masculinity was a very significant issue in the Vikings society. A person, who was offended by another party, had the right to kill him or her according to the law. Old Norse has many words related to homosexuality. The terminology is very rich (sexual semantic field) that is why there are certain sections for certain verbal offences in the Law of Gulathing. For instance, “fullrettisord” (the word fullr means outlaw in Old Norse) was used to express males who give birth to a child (Sørensen, 1983: 16). It is an insult to be used to humiliate the manliness of a man. Biologically, men cannot give a birth to a child but calling a man as fullrettisord means that he does not have male genitalia but female genitalia, in which case he becomes the submissive one as females were seen as submissive in the Vikings society in terms of sexuality. Female sexual behaviour and male sexual behaviour were not standardized in the Vikings society, but male genitalia was the symbol of power, and dominance. Females were the ones who were sexually used by males since they did not have the power and they were the submissive ones. Sexual superiority and inferiority were decided according to the case of having female or male genitalia.

Another sexual term is related to being a submissive or dominant one. The word “sannsordinn” was another word to insult males. (Sørensen, 1983: 16) The meaning of the word is a male who was explicitly and sexually used by another male. In Gray Goose Laws or Gragas, the usage of such humiliating words stated not to be used and the consequences of using of the words were also stated. In Gragas 2, 392, it is stated that:

Ef maðr kallar man ragan eða stroðinn eða sordinn. Oc skal sva sækia sem avnnor full rettis orð enda a maðr vigt igeðn þeim orðum þimr. Jam lengi a maðr vigt um orð sem vm konor oc tile ns næsta alþingis hvartveggia. (Finsen, 1852).

As it is stated in the law, if a man uses the words ragan (ragr), stroðinn or sordinn the penalty is outlawry. The man who is humiliated has the right to kill the one who offended him. These three words are directly related to the concept of homosexuality in Old Norse. In such a masculine society, calling a man sexually used was highly problematic and severe. Since these words affect one’s honour, these serious “verbal offences are thus equated with killing, rape and adultery, and are regarded as more flagrant than, for in-

stance, bodily injury.” (Sørensen, 1983: 17). Any female implication towards a man is outlawry and even more serious than injuries which indicate that effeminacy or any behaviour related to women was seen something disgraceful. The Law shows the fact that effeminacy and homosexuality were not quite tolerable in Scandinavian societies. Even if killing, rape and adultery were supposed to be the most serious crimes in the law, they were not but the usage of certain words towards men was.

In same-sex intercourse (in the case of males), the one who penetrates is called active and the penetrated one is called passive as it is mentioned before. The active one symbolises manliness since he uses his male genitalia for intercourse but the passive one symbolises effeminacy since he does not use his male genitalia but is being used as if he has female genitalia. Sexual roles define the tendency of effeminacy.

Another word that was forbidden to be used was *ragan* (*ragr*) or *argr* in the Gray Goose Laws. *Argr* is the adjective form of the noun *ergi*. The meaning of the word is again the same as the word *sorðinn* but the difference is that if a man is called *sorðinn* it means that he is sexually abused whether willingly or forcefully but if a man is called *argr*, it means that he has the tendency and he willingly plays the female part, and he is interested in that kind of sexual relation. These words were only used for males. If *argr* is used for a female, it has not the same meaning since, as a female, she can, of course, play the female part in a sexual relation. If the word is used for a female, it means she is “immodest, perverted or lecherous” or even nymphomaniac and lustful (Sørensen, 1983: 17).

In the Eddaic poem, *Lokasenna*, there is an example of the usage of being lustful or nymphomaniac for females. “Þegi þú, lðunn, þik kveð ek allra kvenna vergjarnasta vera, síztu arma þína lagðir ítrþvegna um þinn bróðurbana.”<sup>7</sup> (URL-4). In the poem, *lðunn* was called a nymphomaniac or lustful for having slept with her brother’s slayer. Since her brother was slain by the same person she slept with, it was her choice not to sleep with him but her sexual instincts became more dominant, that is why she was called nymphomaniac or lustful. Being pervert or lustful is one of the meanings of *ergi* when it is used for females. The problem is that in Scandinavian societies, only the ones who were dominated or sexually abused by another part were called *sorðinn* or *argr*. The ones that used their male genitalia were

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<sup>7</sup> Be silent, lthun! Thou art, I say, of women most lustful in love, since thou thy washed-bright arms didst wind about thy brother’s slayer.

not seen sorðinn or argr. The significance of the concept is that in homosexual intercourse, in order not to be humiliated; one should be playing the masculine role.

The definition of homosexuality is to tend to have sexual intercourse or romance with the same sex. In Scandinavian societies, the case is pretty different. In order to fulfil the meaning of the words sorðinn and argr, one should be the submissive one rather than the dominant one. The masculine part of the intercourse must have been seen as homosexual, but since he does not leave his masculine behaviour and male manners, he is not seen sorðinn or argr.

Even if there are more rules for men in terms of gender issues, there are also rules for women to follow. In Staðarhólsbók, “the law debarred a woman from wearing male clothes, from cutting her hair like a man, bearing arms or in general behaving like a man.” (Sørensen, 1983: 22). There is archaeological evidence that women were buried not with “female grave goods” but with male objects like weapons. Effeminacy is something immoral for males, in the same manner, being masculine for a female is immoral too (Clover, 1993: 363–387).

In secular laws, there are no explicit statements about homosexuality, but in the Icelandic Homily Book, it is stated that “those appalling secret sins perpetrated by men who respect men no more than women.” (Denton, 2015: 130). Both homosexual actions, gay and lesbian, were forbidden by the law. In the book, it is also stated that “adultery between males, or committed by men on quadrupeds, homosexuality or sodomy” were forbidden and the punishment was severely heavy (Sørensen, 1983: 26). For females, there was the same issue; if women were involved in any homosexual performance, they would also get the same punishment as men. The concept of nið is different in secular and ecclesiastical laws. As it was mentioned before, as long as one performs the masculine side in same-sex intercourse, he was not condemned to be nið, but in the Christian Church, any homosexual activity, whether playing the active or passive role is forbidden.

One of the interesting parts of the Early Icelandic Laws is that there is a concept of shame-stroke. In Grágás it is stated that “these injuries are assessed like major wounds: ...castrating a man, striking a shame-stroke across someone’s buttocks.” (Dennis, 1980: 141). Castrating was also forbidden in Scandinavian societies. Male genitalia was the symbol of power and masculinity, so getting someone’s masculinity was making him argr or



effeminate. In Njall's saga Flosi said that then I will tell thee; I think that thy father the 'Beardless Carle' must have given it, for many know not who look at him whether he is more a man than a woman (URL-6). Then Skarphedinn said that "Such words are ill-spoken, to make game of him, an old man, and no man of any worth has ever done so before." (URL-6). Masculinity was not only lost by castration or making nið but also by age. If a person becomes impotent, he loses his masculinity. In Hrafnkels saga freysgoða, it is stated that "svá ergisk hverr sem eldisk" (URL-2) which means with old age, one becomes argr. Since masculinity was such a significant issue, striking shame-stroke across someone's buttocks was also considered something humiliating. A man's buttocks were something untouchable and taboo in Scandinavian societies; it was the place that should not be touched in order to preserve masculinity. Therefore, the punishment was severe.

The concept of nið was not only related to sexual performance but also emotional behaviour. In many sagas, many poetries are about war stories, invasions, or heroes because, according to the law, it was forbidden to write love poetry. Any poetry with an intense emotional semantic field related to love was forbidden, and the punishment was again outlawry. The reason is that expressing love in a written way was feminine behaviour and since men were not allowed to behave femininely, they were not allowed to write love poetry.

The concept of nið was used in various forms, mostly related to being effeminate and coward in Scandinavian history. Even if there were rules against women being homosexual behaviour, most of the rules were against men for having homosexual intercourse and behaviour because manliness was highly significant for one's honour.

### **Conclusion**

All examples and explanations mentioned above state that masculinity and Gender roles were significant in the Vikings. There were certain gender roles for males and females, such as hunting or taking care of children. Therefore, these gender roles and behaviour define sexual manners. Men were supposed to be masculine and the dominant one, but on the other hand, women must behave according to their manners and be effeminate. In sagas and laws, it can be seen that there are examples of men who were effeminate. Such cases were both humiliating and dishonourable for men. This case is an example of the concept of nið. The meaning of the word

means cowardice, sexual pervert, or homosexual. Nið was mostly used in the meaning of coward and effeminate. The word derives from Viking sexual terminology such as argr and sorðinn, which means sexually used by another man. In many sagas, the usage of the words argr and sorðinn can be seen such as in Njal's Saga, Ljósvetninga Saga, Kristni Saga, Gisla Saga, and Fóstbræðra Saga. The concept of nið was used both in the meaning of homosexual and coward which proves the fact that there was homosexuality in different forms and attitudes such as BDSM in the Vikings. The other pieces of evidence are Scandinavian laws such as Law of Gulathing, Gray Goose Laws or Gragas, Staðarhólsbók and Icelandic Homily Book in which there are certain rules for homosexuality and the usage of the word nið, argr and sorðinn. Since being effeminate was something dishonourable for men, people were forbidden to use those words. Before the Christianization of Scandinavia, only passive men were seen as argr or sorðinn since they were playing the female part in sexual intercourse which changed after the Christianization and both sides in a homosexual relationship were accused of being as argr or sorðinn. It can be inferred that the main idea was to be masculine in any kind of relationship in order to protect the honour and be excluded from being argr or sorðinn. As long as one preserves his masculinity, the homosexual relationship was tolerable in the Vikings before the Christianisation. Even though masculinity was highly significant in the Vikings, women were supposed to act femininely. Those who behave manly or had a homosexual relationship with another woman were also punished according to the severity of their actions and the punishment was also outlawry like in a male-male relationship. It shows the fact that the significant aspect was not to leave the behaviour of particular sex which means men must be masculine and women must be feminine. Homosexuality was not tolerable among women but it was tolerable as long as a man preserves his masculinity and is not the argr or sorðinn one. Evidence from the sagas and law codes show that there was homosexuality in the Vikings.

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