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A RIGHTEOUSNESS HOUSED IN THE BODY:  
THE CONCEPTION AND DIVISION OF KINGS' BODIES IN EARLY MEDIEVAL  
NORTHWESTERN LITERATURE

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
the University of Mississippi

by

SHARON MILLER WOFFORD

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the bodies of kings in medieval Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Norse literature demonstrate sacral kingship, a theory which links the prosperity of a people to the strength of the king's relationship with the divine. I argue that the practice of collecting the heads of English kings as relics, particularly the Northumbrian warrior-kings Edwin and Oswald, is due to an understanding of the king's bodies as a source of power and "luck." I put the dispersal of the heads of Kings Edwin and Oswald in conversation with the work of Andrew Reynolds on deviant burial customs in Anglo-Saxon England. In Irish literature, there are a number of examples of kings and heroes using prostheses, both mechanical and magical, to circumvent the physical standards required of Irish kings. Irish kingship understood physical wholeness as a mark of divine favor and pointed towards one's status as a "true" king. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, the kings Midir and Nuadu are badly injured and their physical wholeness is compromised, which disqualifies them from further rule. They both successfully use prostheses to correct the injury and continue in the role of king. The use of prostheses by kings is a result of resourcefulness, well-connectedness, and material wealth, which could prove one's reversal of fate. Sacral kingship in the Old Norse *Heimskringla* is evidenced by the expectation that a king be marked by "luck" or a sense of being blessed by fate. A king's "luck" appears to manifest in the *ár ok frið*, or "abundance and peace," that he is able to procure for his kingdom. The lack of these benefits is understood to mark a critical flaw in the king's ability to be a mediator. This chapter focuses on a few prominent examples of kings, including the kings Domaldi and Halfdan

the Black, who represent contrasting examples of failed and successful sacral kings. Analyzing the cultural attitude towards medieval kingly bodies in early Northwestern literature aids our understanding of medieval ideas of kingship and disability.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, a king of the Tuath Dé Donann named Nuadu Argatlám loses an arm in battle and must recuse himself from kingship because of the grievous wound. He steps down from the kingship for seven years, until the combined efforts of an artisan smith and Dian Cécht, a famous Tuath Dé physician, manage to craft for him "a silver arm...with the full vigour of an arm in every finger and every joint" (Carey 253). This miraculous construct restores full bodily ability to Nuadu, and he rules for twenty years afterwards. The silver arm, in addition to being a marvel of engineering, is apparently sufficiently functional to circumvent the loss of Nuadu's limb, which had previously made him ineligible to reign. The necessity of this prosthetic limb to restore the king to bodily wholeness is indicative of a belief that one's physicality reflects divine favor. This theory of leadership that poses the king as a mediator between his kingdom (and often the land itself) and the forces of divinity is known as sacral kingship. William A. Chaney defines sacral kingship as a "belief in the dependence of the fruits of the earth on the king's right relationship with the divine" (Chaney 86). I argue that sacral kingship was practiced to varying degrees throughout the British Isles and the North Sea region, and should effect how we understand the treatment of royal bodies in both literature and in practice.

In the past, sacral kingship has been pointed to as a sign of a shared pan-Germanic cultural heritage between Anglo-Saxon and Norse cultures. This sort of scholarship rose to a peak in the 1970s with two texts on the subject: William A. Chaney's book *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, and J.M. Wallace-Hadrill's series of lectures at Oxford, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, both published in the year 1970. The

primary interest of these books appears to have been to emphasize the importance of England's Germanic pagan past and the continuation of these pagan ideals in to the medieval era.

Contemporary scholarship on sacral kingship has slowed since its decade of popularity, and has in general stepped back from this pan-Germanic approach (perhaps due to the problematic implications of the desire to construct a unified Germanic past in contemporary politics.)

Contemporary work on sacral kingship is often more focused on the divinity of kings rather than their corporeality: Sergio Bertelli's *The King's Sacred Body: Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* is one noteworthy example of this sort of work. This thesis is primarily focused on the body, and seeks to reintroduce some of Chaney and Wallace-Hadrill's traditional theories- particularly the notion that ideals of kingship from Anglo-Saxon paganism may have bled in to the early medieval era- in to the modern discussion on sacral kingship. The rise in conversations and articles on disability studies ongoing in the field of literature makes this an optimal time for an investigation in to the medieval understanding of the bodies of kings.

The central question that my thesis seeks to answer is how and why the bodies of early and conversion-era kings in the British Isles and Scandinavia were viewed as inhabiting a special category of physicality. My understanding of the bodies of kings being marked as different in the Anglo-Saxon tradition comes from the treatment of a few case studies- namely the beheaded kings Edwin and Oswald of Northumbria- but the idea of royal bodies being special is more culturally prevalent throughout the Irish and Old Norse traditions. This can be seen in Old Irish literature through the emphasis on a king's wholeness, which is made clear through the legal categories of blemished/unblemished and the taboo of injured rulers continuing to reign. I argue that the same understanding of royal bodies also applied to a lesser extent in early Anglo-Saxon England, based on the lingering culture of paganism present in the 7<sup>th</sup> century suggested by

conversations surrounding the consequences of a king's "righteousness." It is important to seek an answer to this question in order to better understand conceptions of the body in the early medieval North Sea region in addition to breaking down the pagan/Christian binary that often exists when considering Anglo-Saxon England. The fluidity in the category of Christian or non-Christian is especially significant in times and places of transition and cultural exchange, such as 7<sup>th</sup> century Northumbria.

This thesis is predominantly concerned with secular texts from the three traditions which I am examining- more specifically, I am excluding hagiography and other religious literature, based on a desire to make a clear distinction between the representation of king's bodies in secular and historical literature and the rich tradition of saint's bodies and the relic tradition. For this reason, I am excluding the story of St. Edmund, one of the most well-known stories surrounding the talking head of an English king. Although Edwin and especially Oswald of Northumbria were venerated as saints after their deaths, their source material in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* is presented with some degree of objectivity and appears separate from the relic tradition that appears later (such as Abbo of Fleury's 10<sup>th</sup> century account of Edmund.) I am particularly interested in how ideas of sacral kingship may have filtered in to the understanding of the secular community (i.e. non-religious laypeople.) Making this distinction is especially difficult in Anglo-Saxon literature, so I have restricted myself to earlier texts in an attempt to remain close to this period of transition. As conversion-era kings, I interpret Edwin and Oswald as living during a period of cultural transition from native forms of religion to Christianity.

The texts that form the basis of my research are a blend of literature and historical sources. My chapter on the life and death of Edwin and Oswald is rooted in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, a text which gives detailed accounts of the kings' lives and their

burials. This text is especially useful for the detail Bede gives to the rise of Oswald's cult following after his death, in addition to holy sites related to Oswald and the miracles and healing related to his relics. The Irish sources that I use to inform my understanding of the king's body in medieval Ireland start with the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, or “The Book of Invasions of Ireland,” which gives a (at least partially fictitious) history of the leadership of Ireland. The story of the king Nuadu Argatlám in the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* is the source that initially inspired this project and it provides a cornerstone example of a ruler being deposed because of a physical imperfection. There are a number of literary texts that I draw on as well, though the major case studies of this chapter come from the *Tochmarc Étaíne* and the story of Midir's eye, as well as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The number of texts I use to support the necessity of the “wholeness” of kings in medieval Irish literature is reflective of the importance of this idea. Appropriately, the primary text for my analysis of Old Norse kingship is the *Heimskringla*, one of the foundational Norse king's sagas. The first part of the *Heimskringla* is the *Ynglingasaga*, which is a narrative of the lineage of the Yngling dynasty. This source is useful as an account of each Yngling king's lifetime and legacy, including the correspondence between a king's bodily perfection and his “righteousness.” These texts are strong representations of the cultural ideologies surrounding kingship in Old English, Old Irish, and Old Norse literature.

In my first chapter, I examine Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* for his account of the lifetimes and ultimate executions of Edwin, the first Christian king of Northumbria, and his successor Oswald. Edwin and Oswald reigned during a time of political and cultural transition, and as such, I suggest that pre-Christian Germanic cultural beliefs such as the idea of sacral kingship may have influenced how the kings' bodies were perceived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. A later letter from Alcuin to King Aethelred in 793 appears to confirm this: Alcuin mentions that “in the

king's righteousness is the prosperity of the whole folk," which is a notion that rings of a more pagan era. I read the division of Oswald's body in particular after his death and the interment of his head in a place of significance as an attempt to benefit from his "righteousness," or royal luck. Additionally, the mission to retrieve Oswald's head, when considered with his adolescence among the Irish and the Celtic presence in his cult following, recalls the "head-hunting" motif in medieval Irish literature. This, along with Andrew Reynolds' parameters for what was considered deviant or unusual burial in Anglo-Saxon England, marks the bodies of Edwin and Oswald as special or separate in significant ways.

The second chapter investigates in further detail how king's bodies were represented in medieval Irish literature. Bart Jaski explains the function of Irish kings as a "mediator between human and divine and between society and nature" (Jaski 57). As a result of this link, kings were expected to physically reflect divine favor: a king's physical beauty and wholeness were thought to be indicative of their degree of "luck." Kings were expected to abdicate the throne if they received an injury or even a significant blow to their character; the story of the *Tucait indarba na nDéssi* (The Expulsion of the Déssi) features a taboo or *geis* that forbids an injured king from sleeping in the kingdom of Tara. However, in my research I have come to the conclusion that the binary of blemished/unblemished is not as rigid as it may initially appear. In this chapter, I explore three case studies of how Irish kings and warriors in literature circumvent the expectation of bodily wholeness through the use of prosthetic eyes or limbs. Nuadu's silver arm prosthetic- to return to my original example- allows him to continue ruling and lets him cross the line in and out of the category of bodily wholeness.

Snorri Sturluson's *Ynglingasaga* begins with the story of an ancient Swedish king named Domaldi who is sacrificed by his people to correct the extreme famine wracking his kingdom.

Domaldi's murder because of the poor harvests is a clear exemplar of sacral kingship being practiced; as the intercessor between his people and nature, Domaldi is responsible for mediating the relationship between the two. His sacrifice puts an end to his kingdom's suffering. As with Old English, the Old Norse lexicon has a number of words for expressing the idea of “luck” as it relates to one's divine favor. The *Ynglingasaga* makes it clear that the king was responsible for maintaining his luck, and would face consequences for his failure to do so (although the human sacrifice of Domaldi seems to be an outlier in this respect.) In this third chapter, I will also discuss the treatment of the good king Halfdan the Black as a counterpoint to Domaldi's murder at Uppsala. “All loved [Halfdan] highly” because the kingdom's resources flourished greatly during his reign, and after his death, pieces of his corpse were distributed to four different villages and laid in howes in the hope of achieving good harvests (Monsen 42.) I argue that the division of Halfdan's body for the villages demonstrates the cultural practice of sacral kingship as well as an understanding of a king's “luck” or righteousness being housed in and represented by the body. I also discuss to what extent the category of “blemishedness” or being disabled as we see it in Old Irish ideology exists in the world of Old Norse, where gods like Odin and Thor represent prominent figures in the pantheon.

I read these three literary traditions as being in conversation with one another because of the cultural exchange that was constantly occurring in the British Isles between the Anglo-Saxons, the Norse, and the Irish in the early Middle Ages, especially in regions like Northumbria. In my section on Oswald, I will discuss the active role that the Irish took in the Christianization of Northumbria and how Oswald's own upbringing amongst the Irish may have influenced his cult after his death. More than just being in geographic proximity, the scholarly communities of the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons were in conversation starting with Columba and

the monastery at Iona in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century. The Norse and Irish people were also in contact beginning with the Viking raids on Ireland in 794, with these early raiding patterns eventually resulting in more permanent settlements in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century (Ó Corráin 17.) As these people groups came in to contact with one another, it is most likely that their ideas and literatures came in to contact as well. The Vikings in England followed a similar trajectory of raiding that developed in to more permanent settlements as they did in Ireland; the shared Germanic tradition of the Anglo-Saxon and the Norse peoples also lends itself to discussion of how this mutual cultural basis may have evolved after the introduction of Christianity. This thesis investigates how ideas of sacral kingship and the bodies of kings were understood and represented in the literatures of this zone of cultural interchange.

## II. THE TREATMENT OF THE KING'S BODY IN ANGLO-SAXON NORTHUMBRIA

### 1. Defining sacral kingship

The extent to which the recently converted Anglo-Saxons clung to the traditions of their pagan past is a matter of some contention among scholars, and the role of the Anglo-Saxon king is no exception. The ancient Germanic conception of a sacral king, a monarch whose own fate and physical being were intertwined with that of his people and his country, likely had a presence in Anglo-Saxon culture that endured after their conversion. In a letter to King Aethelred in 793, Alcuin wrote: "In the king's righteousness is the prosperity of the whole folk, victory of the army, mildness of the seasons, abundance of the land, the blessing of sons, the health of the people" (Chaney 64-65). Alcuin makes explicit the idea that the king's own worthiness has consequences for his subjects in more than just a moral sense; his "righteousness" also affects the land itself in that it has bearing on the length and severity of seasons and the quality of the harvest. The sacrality of this function of Anglo-Saxon kings is evident, as he becomes an avatar of the connection between his people and the often treacherous natural world. He is depended on as a mediator between his citizens and natural forces, an equation in which the Christian God is conspicuously absent. Perhaps Alcuin is suggesting that a king's faith will bring blessings to his people, just as his lack of it would surely bring disfavor, but Alcuin implies directness between the two. Saying that a king's righteousness *is* his people's prosperity suggests a one-to-one correspondence that does not insinuate that the king functions as an intercessor to God. His own actions and "righteousness" have a direct effect on his people's wellbeing and the environment.

## 2. The vocabulary of sacral kingship in Old English

Chaney uses the term “luck” to describe the role of the king: “[he is] the embodiment of the 'luck' of the folk...when the king's 'luck' or charismatic power is maintained, the favour of the god rests with the tribe; when he has lost his 'luck' and is impotent to secure the divine blessings, his people are justified...to replace him" (Chaney 12). The concept of “righteousness,” with its connection of fortune and divine favor that Alcuin alludes to (with its direct effect on things like the harvest), appears equivalent to Chaney’s definition of “luck.”

While Alcuin did not phrase it in such pagan terms, his native Old English had multiple words for “luck,” including *hæl*, *ead*, *est*, and *ar* that were often used in heroic poetry to signify one’s fortune (Beekman Taylor 131.) Paul Beekman Taylor addresses the failings of the word “luck” in his article “The language of sacral kingship in Beowulf,” noting that “luck” only entered English in the 1500s and maintains connotations with gambling (Beekman Taylor 131.) These terms could perhaps be more accurately translated with the aid of Latin glosses, which, for example, gloss *hæl* with *salus*, and *ead* with *prosperitas*, *felicitas*, and *beatitudo* (Beekman Taylor 131.) These glosses aid us in a more complete understanding of the depth of the term “luck.” More than just success through chance, “luck” is connected with ideas like health, happiness, and prosperity, all of which fit in to Alcuin’s model of a king’s responsibilities. The conception of health and prosperity being linguistically in the scope of “luck” aids our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon conception of the word.

We see these terms at work in context in *Beowulf*, a text that at the same time centers action around the battles with three monsters and imparts valuable lessons about Anglo-Saxon kingship. After the confrontation with Grendel, when Beowulf reports his success back to Hrothgar in lines 958-959: *We þæt ellenweorc estum miclum/ feohtan fremedon* (“We performed

bold work in fight with great favor/luck,” borrowing Beekman Taylor’s translation on p.131.) Here *estum* is operating in a way that suggests more than just luck, but the sense of divine favor that is connoted with sacral kingship. *Estum*, from *est*, is glossed with words like *benevolentia* and *munificentia*, the latter meaning “bountiful” or “munificent.” Bounty brings to mind Alcuin’s comment on the “abundance of the land” being part of a king’s duties, and suggests here that Beowulf is operating in a sacral register while speaking. In the text, Beowulf has just proven his righteousness in the fight with Grendel by finding victory and seizing Grendel’s arm as a trophy (an act that renders Grendel *unhæl* and suggests a relationship between the body and his maintenance or loss of luck.) His comment that he and his warriors accomplished it with “great favor” or “luck” attributes the victory to his good relationship with some other force- be it the Christian God or an unnamed divine power.

### **3. A society in religious transition**

In his book *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, Chaney uses this passage from Alcuin as evidence that English sacral kingship continued to be implemented even after the adoption of Christianity. Alcuin and King Aethelred were both Christian figures, and this letter suggests that the king’s traditional sacral role was considered not only important, but also compatible with their new faith. Rather than being incompatible, important feast days of Anglo-Saxon paganism became assimilated into Christian practice on the occasions of Winter’s Day, Midwinter’s Day, and Summer’s Day (Chaney 65). Chaney notes an entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that says “thrice a year” (on these feast days) the English kings wore their crowns, and were therefore at their most sovereign and most visible. The Church was incorporated into these feasting rituals after the conversion, with provisions written in for where a bishop would sit at

the feast were he to attend, according to tenth century Anglo-Saxon laws (Chaney 66). However, the feasts retained pagan undertones, with the figure of the king at the center. All this is to say that total separation from ancestral pagan traditions was likely not seen as necessary, and in many instances, such as the major feast days, they were simply assimilated into current Christian practice. Alcuin and Aethelred's shared faith does not preclude them from participating in the system of sacral kingship, nor can it be said to have no place in a newly Christian society. In fact, the king's position as a mediator between his people and divinity in sacral kingship was likely amenable to the Christian designation of king as ruler of God's people on Earth.

Even Bede is not immune to the lingering influence of sacral kingship. In his discussion of King Edwin in Book 2, Chapter 9 of *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bede recounts the story of King Edwin's expansion of his kingdom to include Briton-ruled land and the islands of Anglesey and Mann (Colgrave and Mynors 163). Edwin had not yet accepted the Christian faith at this point in his history, and Bede notes that *cui uidelicet regi, in auspiciis suscipiendae fidei et regni caelestis, potestas etiam terreni creuerat imperii*: "the king's earthly power had increased as an augury that he was to become a believer" (Colgrave and Mynors 163). The word "augury," or omen, comes from the Latin *auspex*, which was the term for an interpreter of signs and omens in ancient Rome, and is a word often thought to be related to the interpretation of the movement and pattern of birds. Bede uses the word *auspiciis* in the Latin, which shares the same Latin root as our English borrowing. This is a word that is steeped in the pagan traditions of ancient Rome and other non-Christian divination practices. Both the word choice and the sentiment expressed evoke the idea of the king as a mediator between his kingdom and the divine. The king's actions on earth, in this case Edwin's expansion of his territory, are indicative of future events: his acceptance of Christianity. Even though in this case the predicted

future is Edwin's conversion, Bede interprets his pre-conversion success as a sign of God's future approval. This statement shows evidence of sacral thought because Edwin's own "righteousness" (to borrow Alcuin's term) in conquering more land increases "the prosperity of the whole folk" by securing the favor of the divine.

Bede's use of the term "augury" echoes an earlier text by Gildas the Wise, a British monk living and writing in the 6th century. His text *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, or "On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain," was hugely influential to future historians, including Bede himself, as a contemporary 6th century source. Gildas was a native British author, and though Christian, often used language with pre-Christian connotations in his narrative. This is especially true in his recounting of the Saxon invasion:

*"...secundis uelis omine auguriisque, quibus uaticinabatur, certo apud eum praesagio, quod ter centum annis patriam, cui proras librabat, insideret, centum uero quinquaginta, hoc est dimidio temporis, saepius uastaret, euectus, primum in orientali parte insulae iubente infausto tyranno terribiles infixit unguis, quasi pro patria pugnaturus sed eam certius impugnaturus."*

"The winds were favourable; favourable too the omens and auguries, which prophesied, according to a sure portent among them, that they would live for three hundred years in the land towards which their prows were directed, and that for half the time...they would repeatedly lay it to waste" (Winterbottom 26.)

The basis of Gildas' polemic is that the Britons brought the Saxons down upon themselves as a result of their sinful behavior. In this passage, Gildas notes that all the conditions, including the divination used by the Saxons, enabled the Saxons to find success in battle. An augury in this context is a tool used by the pagan Saxons to (successfully) predict

future events. Bede calling Edwin's military victories an augury for his future Christianity co-opts distinctly pagan language and links Edwin's own success to the fate of his kingdom.

#### **4. The life of Oswald of Northumbria**

One of the other key transitional figures in the move from cultural emphasis on native Germanic king-cults to the Christian saint-cults is that of King Oswald of Northumbria. Oswald converted to Christianity while living amongst the Irish in Dál Riada before eventually returning to England to reclaim his father's kingdom. Proclaiming the name of the Christian God, Oswald defeated his enemy at Heavenfield in 634 and ruled for nearly a decade before he was ultimately killed in battle (Stancliffe 33). Oswald was responsible for the spread of Christianity through Northumberland, but his life otherwise reads like the story of an Anglo-Saxon hero, as J.R.R. Tolkien notably wrote in his famous essay "The Monsters and the Critics." The warrior-king aspect of Oswald's life perhaps led to his posthumous popularity and the widespread appeal of his cult. One of the significant things about Oswald's cult is the number of related holy sites that resulted from the dissemination of his body parts to different churches such as Lindisfarne and Bamburgh, in addition to the attention paid to his site of death at Maserfield. His body was notably divided into parts and distributed, with his head becoming a relic at Lindisfarne and his uncorrupted arms and hands at Bamburgh.

Oswald became a renowned figure in Conversion-era Anglo-Saxon England for both his spiritual and secular power. As a king, he reunified the kingdoms of Deira and Bernicia in Northumberland and was responsible for promoting the spread of Christianity to his people. Oswald's political actions were supplemented with marvelous acts in the service of Christ that led to his popularity and ultimate sainthood. Oswald's most famous display of faith occurred

before the battle at Heavenfield, when it is said he hastily constructed a cross at the battle site and led his army in prayer. Bede speaks about the “ardour of faith” that caused Oswald to plant the cross in the ground himself, and hold it upright while his armies buried the base of it to keep in in place: “*Denique / fertur quia facta citato opere cruce, ac fouea praeparata in qua statui deberet, ipse fide feruens hanc arripuerit ac foueae inposuerit atque utraque manu erectam tenuerit, donec adgesto a militibus puluere terrae figeretur...*” (Colgrave and Mynors 214.)

Having erected the cross, Oswald prayed on his knees with his soldiers and asked God for the victory. His dedication to the faith was proved by his willingness to use this crucial time before the battle in prayer. Oswald’s righteousness was proven in the following engagement against Cædwalla, as his armies were successful in their early morning assault on the pagan enemy forces.

## **5. The cult and relics of Oswald**

After his death, Oswald’s cult rose to prominence across Europe and had a number of associated sites and relics. Splinters from the cross and the site where it was planted in the ground at Heavensfield became relics in their own right. People often visited the place where Oswald prayed with his soldiers hoping to gain some sort of favor, and those seeking healing were reported to have ingested water that contained splinters of the cross. The dirt from the site of Oswald’s death at Maserfelth was also thought to be miraculous; like the splinters of the cross, dirt was taken from the battle-site and placed in water and consumed with the hopes of curing sickness. Bede says this practice became so popular that eventually *ut paulatim ablata exinde terra fossam ad mensuram staturae uirilil altam reddiderit*, “so much earth was removed that a hole was made, as deep as a man’s height” (Colgrave and Mynors 243.) These places and

artifacts were tangentially made holy by their connection with Oswald, so it follows that parts of his body itself would become relics after his death.

The separation of Oswald's hands and arms from his body can be attributed to the saintliness he demonstrated during his lifetime. Oswald's hand and arm came to be associated with his holiness after the events of an Easter Day feast with the Bishop Aidan of Lindisfarne. We are told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* that Oswald and Aidan sat down to a feast made up of rich and sumptuous "dainties," but they were then interrupted by a report of poor citizens outside of the gates asking for alms (Colgrave and Mynors 231). Oswald rises to the occasion as a holy and generous king by ordering that these dainties be distributed amongst the crowd of the poor, with no concern that the luxurious food that is quite literally fit for a king is being spent in this manner. Bishop Aidan is impressed by this display of charity, and he grasped [Oswald] by the right hand, and said, 'May this hand never decay'" (*Quo uiso pontifex] adprehendit dexteram eius et ait: 'Numquam inueterescat haec manus.')* When Oswald eventually falls in battle, this hand and arm are removed from his body to be placed in a reliquary in Bamburgh where, according to Bede, "they have remained uncorrupt until this present time" (Colgrave and Mynors 231).

The hand and arm relic follow a rather predictable pattern, as far as holy relics go, and their removal will not be surprising to those familiar with medieval sainthood. Relics tend to represent the holiness of the person during life- as Oswald's hand did after the Easter feast- and are removed after death. The relic is then enshrined in a church in a relevant location to be venerated. It is also common that after the death of the saint, their relics do not follow the normal rules of decay. In this particular case, Aidan even specifically blesses Oswald's hand with

incorruptibility. The reasons for the removal and separate burial of Oswald's head, however, are less clear.

Even with the relic tradition in mind, we should take pause at the removal of Oswald's head. The head doesn't appear to be thought of as a relic in the same traditional sense as his hand and arm, in that the head is not emblematic of a means of martyrdom or connected in a significant way to Oswald's holiness. Although Oswald's head was severed by enemy forces in the wake of the battle, it is ambiguous whether or not beheading was the cause of death- it was almost certainly not an execution-style martyrdom, as one might think of when considering John the Baptist. The dismemberment and separate interment of saints' heads from their bodies is rare, but both Oswald and Edwin are subjected to this unusual burial practice. In seeking an explanation, I would like to first establish the parameters for both normative and "deviant" burials in 7th century Anglo-Saxon England.

## **6. Non-normative burials in Anglo-Saxon England**

Andrew Reynolds, in his book titled *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Practices*, defines a "deviant" burial as one that does not adhere to normative burial customs, which in the 7th-9th centuries denotes a corpse that is inhumed in the supine position, with the head facing west (Reynolds 36). Deviances from this practice usually indicate an abnormality in the manner of death that affects how the individual is buried. Reynolds identifies eight possible causes that result in a deviant burial: battle, execution, massacre, murder, plague, sacrifice, and superstition. People who were considered harmful or somehow different from the community because of any of these eight reasons were often marked as deviant by the burial practices of early Anglo-Saxons. Burials could be categorized as deviant by either the burial rites or the burial location.

Many deviant burials occur on or near the borders of cemeteries, which delineate consecrated ground from non-consecrated and literally separate the body from the normative community (Reynolds 37). In others, it is only by exhumation that burials are known to be non-normative, such as murder victims who are buried in the prone position but are buried in community cemeteries (Reynolds 47). It should be made clear that deviant burials do not indicate some kind of deviancy in life; although executed criminals are buried in a deviant fashion, so are arguably blameless plague victims, soldiers who fall in battle, and innocents who have been killed in a massacre. Non-normative (deviant) burials are indicative of a social distinction from the normative community due to a variety of causes.

## **7. Deviant burials in conversation with the bodies of Oswald and Edwin**

Reynold's framework for identifying the causes and archaeological signifiers of deviant burials can aid our understanding of the treatment of Edwin and Oswald's kingly bodies. Decapitation and the removal of body parts, including limbs, is a common deviant marker that tends to be a result of death in battle or execution. Both corpses that were executed and those that fell in battle tend to display marks of trauma, and are often hard to differentiate from one another because of the variance of execution rites among individual communities and regions (Reynolds 44). Reynolds' work provides a means of interpretation for the deviant burials of Edwin and Oswald, especially with the social context of how battle-deaths were marked by the community. Both Edwin and Oswald were Northumbrian warrior-kings who fell in battle against pagan armies and whose bodies were decapitated and interred in multiple pieces. Oswald's death at Maserfelth came at the hands of the pagan army of Mercians led by Penda, whom Bede tells us were the very same ones that killed Edwin in 633 (Colgrave and Mynors

243.) The process of Oswald's burial is exceptional to begin with. From Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*:

*“Ossa igitur illius translata et condita sunt in monasterio, quo diximus. Porro caput et manus cum brachiis a corpore praecisas iussit rex, qui occiderat, in stipitinus/ suspendi. Quo post annum deueniens cum exercitu successor regni eius Osuiu abstulit ea, et caput quidem in cymiterio Lindisfarnensis ecclesiae, in regia uero ciuitate manus cum brachiis condidit.”*

“So Oswald's bones were translated to the monastery we have mentioned and there interred. The king who slew him ordered his head and his hands to be severed from his body and hung on stakes. A year afterwards, his successor Oswiu came thither with an army and took them away. He buried the head in a burial place in the church at Lindisfarne, but the hands and arms he buried in the royal city of Bamborough” (Colgrave and Mynors 252-253.)

The line between a death in battle and an execution is again blurred here. The mutilation of Oswald and the separation of his body was done by opposing forces, and it lay there until it was retrieved by an allied army. However, upon its retrieval the pieces remained separated- a practice which is unusual even among battle-burials; burials with the skulls missing make up less than half of all early Anglo-Saxon decapitation burials included in Reynolds' data (Reynolds 81). Oftentimes the skulls of decapitated bodies were placed in the grave alongside the corpse, or even replaced in “normal anatomical position” (Philpott 77-79). However, Oswald remained scattered even after his corpse was retrieved by friendly forces.

The process of Edwin's decapitation was far more ambiguous than that of Oswald. Bede mentions that Edwin was killed at Hæthfeld on October 12, 633, and then goes on to detail the destruction of Edwin's armies and the persecution of the Church that occurred under the influence of the Mercian king Penda in the wake of the battle. It is then that Bede returns to

Edwin's body, saying that "the head of King Edwin was brought to York and afterwards placed in the church of the apostle St. Peter" (*adlatum est autem caput Eduini regis Eburacum, et inlatum postea in eccelsiam*) (Colgrave and Mynors 204.) *Inlatum*, derived from the Latin *infero*, means "to carry, bring, or put into a place," but also carries the secondary meaning of "to pay, as a tribute or tax" (Lewis and Short.) These connotations are significant because the idea that Edwin's own forces might take the head as some kind of tribute to place in the church speaks to the importance of the head as a locus of social and political power. At the very least, his armies' seizure of their king's head ensures that it and whatever benefits it might bring do not fall into the possession of the heathen armies of Mercia.

I propose that these unusual decapitations of Oswald and Edwin and their deviant burials can be understood through the concept of sacral kingship, as I have already outlined it. A king's own "luck," which often manifests in signs of fortune like good harvests and mild seasons, is connected to his physical body. As a result, a body which is broken up and interred at a number of burial sites could bring benefits to an even larger number of people, as the body can have an effect over more than just one location. The Old Norse example of Halfdan the Black, which I will discuss shortly, used this logic as the reason for dividing the Halfdan's body and distributing it to a number of villages. Perhaps the lingering cultural memory of sacral kingship caused those who retrieved the bodies of Oswald and Edwin to construct two separate spaces in which to put the head and the body in the hopes of creating not one, but two special locations. I would like to now introduce a conversation on medieval Irish symbolism attached to the head to the context of Oswald's unusual burial, based on the time he spent among the Irish during his adolescence.

## **8. Oswald's Celtic connections**

Oswald of Northumbria had a special relationship with the Irish that influenced the political and religious climate of his reign. Oswald's life before he became king was marked by a period of exile with his brothers among the Irish in Dál Riada. During this time, they were converted and baptized by Irish Christians and learned to speak the language. Oswald continued to favor Irish Christianity in Northumbria during his kingship, including asking the church in Ireland to send him a bishop in the year 635, citing his time among them as the reason for this choice (McCann 116.) The man who eventually became bishop was Aidan, who blessed Oswald's hand against putrefaction on Easter. Additionally, Oswald supported the Irish Columban mission to Northumbria, and acted as an interpreter upon their arrival. The optics of Oswald welcoming the Irish monks in their own tongue likely made a strong impression; the Columban mission was successful in establishing a foothold in the area, with key monasteries established in the North in Lindisfarne and Whitby (McCann 121.) Irish forms of monasticism were dominant throughout Northumbria until Oswald's brother and successor, King Oswiu, held the Synod of Whitby in 664, during which it was officially decreed that Northumbria would instead follow Roman practices.

The figure of Oswald appeared to have special significance among Celtic peoples who may have in turn influenced his cult. In his article "Membra Disjecta: the Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult," Alan Thacker argues for the placement of Maserfelth, Oswald's death site, "on the northern boundary of Lindsey, in some border region freely accessible both to Britons and Oswald's own people" (Thacker 99.) Both of the key Oswald-related sites of his lifetime, Maserfelth and Heavensfield (where he erected the makeshift cross before battle,) were open-air locations that were not connected to any one church (Thacker 100.) The accessibility of Maserfelth and Heavensfield based on these two factors likely contributed to the popularity of Oswald's cult.

Anyone nearby could visit Maserfelth or come gather dirt from Heavensfield and partake of its miraculous properties. There was known to be a Briton in the early days of the cult, so a site in proximity to populations of Britons is important to note. Relics such as splinters from the stake that pierced Oswald's head were also known to have made it to Ireland via Willibrord (Colgrave and Mynors 253.) Additionally, Oswald's head was kept at Lindisfarne, amongst its predominantly Celtic community, and was eventually interred with the body of St. Cuthbert. There are a number of features of Oswald's following and his treatment after death that appear to be influenced by older Anglo-Saxon and Celtic practices. It is particularly the emphasis on the head that evokes the pagan Celtic idea of the power of the head and the practice of displaying them on gateways, ramparts, and enshrining them in temples (Thacker 102.) "Head-hunting" is also a popular literary motif in medieval Irish literature such as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, which often includes the retrieval of heads as trophies during battle sequences. The retrieval of Oswald's own head is framed as a kind of head-hunting mission: Bede notes in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* that Oswald's remains were not retrieved from the battlefield until a year after his death, when his brother Oswiu pushed in to foreign territory to collect them (Colgrave and Mynors 253.) Their retrieval carries with it all the power of the head-hunting motif, in that Oswiu had to defeat his enemy to claim the head (though it was a trophy taken from his own side.)

## **9. Chapter Conclusion**

It might initially be surprising that the bodies of highly valued members of society- in this case, kings- were subject to bodily dismemberment, especially by their own side, but Reynold's research on non-normative burials can be read in conversation with theories of sacral kingship and their emphasis on the power of the body. The bodies of Oswald and Edwin, even before their execution-style deaths in battle, were marked as being separate or special because of their

royal bodies and the responsibilities borne by them as avatars of “luck” (according to Alcuin’s letter.) Perhaps the desire for access to the “luck” of these Northumbrian kings led to the division of the body and the creation of a number of burial sites, so that the benefits of the pieces of a king’s sacred body could be had by a greater number. Although the importance of the sacral king’s body is less explicit in Anglo-Saxon literature than Old Irish or Old Norse literature, there is still cultural precedent for loss of body parts being tied to loss of luck, as we see in the instance of Grendel’s missing limb making him *unhael*. I would also argue that Oswald’s own connections to Ireland and the Celtic presence (namely Irish and Briton) in his cult perhaps influenced the understanding of his head being an important trophy that was interred in a place of honor at Bamburgh.

### III. BLEMISHES, KINGSHIP, AND PROSTHETICS IN MEDIEVAL IRISH LITERATURE

#### 1. Irish sacral kingship

The medieval Irish ideal of kingship requires physical wholeness (and often aesthetic beauty) in order to be a viable ruler. This necessity of wholeness appears to derive from the idea of sacral kingship, as it is the king's role to intermediate between his people and the supernatural to ensure things like a bountiful harvest and peaceful rule- the same requirements put forth in Alcuin's letter in 793. As a mediator between society and nature, kings are a representative of both, a connection that is apparent in much of early Irish literature because of the relationship between a healthy king and healthy land. This connection strongly suggests a form of sacral kingship was being practiced, in addition to a "belief in the dependence of the fruits of the earth on the king's right relationship with the divine" (Chaney 86). As the representative of one's kingdom, a ruler must be able-bodied and without blemish to prove favor. A king's need to be aesthetically beautiful also connects to the idea of expression of divine favor (although the beauty of kings may be greatly exaggerated, according to a fabulous late medieval poem that scathingly writes: 'a blinking eye, asquint and blear,/ you make 'steady' and 'crystal clear' [Byrne 16.] ) At any rate, a king's wholeness and divine favor were essential for ensuring the wellbeing of his people. In this paper, I will examine the examples of Nuadu and others to argue that prostheses were a viable alternative for medieval Irish kings to fulfill the requirements put on their bodies by sacral kingship.

The Irish idea of sacral kingship seems to echo the conception of "luck" that exists in Anglo-Saxon culture; the king is viewed as the avatar of his people, and misfortune that befalls

him is certain to befall the people in turn. Therefore a king's wellbeing was not only representative of his own personal luck, but also that of his "folk," and oftentimes the land itself. Francis J. Byrne notes a sacral king's "landedness" as a difference between the Irish and Germanic kings. Byrne describes Irish kingship as very much connected to the land, or "rooted in soil," and contrasts this with the constantly-shifting boundaries of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Byrne 30). Anglo-Saxon kings were connected to their kingdoms in a less literal sense than the one imagined by the Irish: in Irish literature, kings were frequently depicted as physically coupling with an avatar of Sovereignty. Additionally, a serious injury or a crippling illness was a sure sign that the king had fallen out of divine favor and could no longer be a successful intermediary- that he wasn't the "right" or "true" king.

## **2. A taboo against blemishes**

In her book *From Kings to Warlords: The Changing Political Structure of Gaelic Ireland in the Later Middle Ages*, Katharine Simms explains the distinction between a "true" king and a "false" king. For a king to be true, he must lack any blemishes or failings of character, including "inhospitality, injustice, or cowardice" (Simms 21). A true king can easily become "false" by becoming sick and injured, or cruel, unjust, or cowardly. While the bodily wholeness of a king is crucial, a flaw of character such as cowardice is equally as damaging to his status as the representative of the people. A king can also be so terribly satirized that he becomes unfit to rule, as this satire is a blemish upon his social standing. Satire, while clearly unable to deal bodily damage, acts as a weapon against one's honor in medieval Irish society where reputation was prized (Breatnach 63). This is consistent with the medieval Irish idea of the power of words, which is seen through the importance placed on both satirists and the class of poets called *filid*,

who were responsible for composing poems to honor kings and their deeds. The fluidity of a king's true-ness means that while some of the necessary traits (such as beauty) are innate, others like reputation and strength of character can be lost and a king can become false or unjust.

"Blemishes," which are a crucial notion in the medieval Irish kingship, can cover a wide range of maladies. A blemish can be a physical ailment or deformity, a battle-wound, a character flaw, or an especially virulent work of satire. Bart Jaski notes that the Irish term for being "without blemish" is *díanim*. The word *díanim* does not specifically refer to blemishes in the context of kingship, but it does appear in Irish legal tracts. Legally, a blemish is "a visible wound, a physical defect, or a disqualification" (Jaski 82). The presence of blemishedness in law codes indicates not only the importance of the concept, but also to blemished and unblemished as legally recognized statuses. It also suggests that the idea of blemishedness extends beyond just royalty and could apply to other citizens, although the consequences are certainly more severe for those in power.

King-specific blemishedness in all its forms is part of a restriction in a famous *geis* in the *Tuait indarba na nDéssi*, or "The Expulsion of the Déssi." In this story, the king Cormac mac Airt is blinded in one eye by a spear and has to surrender the kingship to his son. However, in addition to recusing himself as king, Cormac must go elsewhere to spend the night, for it was a *geis* (or "unlawful") "for a king with a blemish to sleep in Tara" (Jaski 83). This could be due to the perceived lack of divine favor that accompanies a blemished king, or a second-hand sense of shame that comes from harboring him in their kingdom. Tara also has special cultural significance as the seat of the high kings of Ireland, and as such it may be particularly important that a king that is unjust, or not "true," not spend the night in the territory. This indicates a fear of the consequences of a blemished king on the land that he physically interacts with.

The *geis* of a blemished king sleeping in Tara points towards a broader trend in the Irish institution of kingship, which is that a king must also be "true" and able-bodied because of his connection to the land of Ireland itself. Nowhere does this manifest more clearly than in the ancient Irish figure of the sovereignty goddess. In medieval Irish literature, Sovereignty often manifests as a woman who vets candidates for the kingship and bestows her favor on those she deems worthy, primarily through sexual acts. Amy Mulligan describes this as a kind of *heiros gamos*, or "sacred wedding:" a symbolic and sexual union between a king and the personification of the land (Mulligan 1015). Through the act of intercourse, sovereignty is symbolically granted to her partner, and ruler and land are bonded. The link between king and land is not as literal as the figure of the sovereignty goddess, but the king is still its chosen representative, and therefore must maintain a wholeness of body and character.

### **3. An avatar of the land**

One of the clearest examples of the sovereignty goddess figure is from *Echtra Mac nEchach*, "The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedón." In this story, the five sons of Eochaid are vying for their father's inheritance when they must retrieve water from a well-guarded by a bristly old hag. As they each visit her, she demands a kiss before she will allow them to draw water. After three successive failed attempts, the son Fiachra finally consents to kiss her. He gives the hag the lightest of pecks, and he is told that he will visit Tara. When Niall visits, he raises the stakes and tells the hag "besides giving a kiss, I will lie beside [you]" (Koch and Carey 205-206). Niall is rewarded for his generosity; the hag transforms suddenly in to a beautiful woman with "plump queenly forearms" and declares "I am the sovereignty." As a result

of their sexual encounter, Niall is told that he will have superiority over all the men of Ireland and sovereignty of the land of Tara will forever belong to his descendants.

Each brother's degree of physical interaction with the sovereignty goddess decides how much they are rewarded. Sovereignty's connection to the land is made literal through the rewards she grants to the sons of Eochaid: Fiachra, who only lightly brushes her cheek, is given a glimpse of Tara. The text reads "two kings of his race obtained the kingship of Ireland...and none obtained it from the race of the other sons" (Koch and Carey 206). His physical interaction with the sovereignty goddess, no matter how slight, ties Fiachra and his kin to a physical location. The truth of this is magnified for Niall, whose union with the goddess grants him and his descendants the kingship of Tara. Sovereignty is the physical incarnation of the land of Ireland, and when Niall lays with her, he binds himself and his ancestors to it. Sovereignty entails dominion over, but also responsibility for, the kingdom of "brilliant sturdy Tara" (Koch and Carey 207).

More often than not a blemish signifies the end of his reign for reasons discussed above, though it is not entirely unheard of for a blemished king to continue ruling. Katharine Simms observes a trend of sobriquets that indicate physical shortcomings of various kings later in the period, such as "the wry-necked," "the one-eyed," or "the lame" (Simms 50). These examples come from after the eleventh century, as does the case of the king Donnchadh who ruled for forty years after he lost a hand in 1019. However, the reason that he is allowed to continue ruling despite his injury is not mentioned by the text. A common thread that unites examples of a blemished king's reign seems to be the desperation of the people, or a beloved or well-qualified king becoming accidentally injured. In most of these instances, it is by the will of the nobility that the king is able to keep ruling.

#### 4. Exceptions to the rule

Bart Jaski gives several examples of blemished kings who continue ruling in his chapter on sacral kingship in *Early Irish Kingship and Succession*. In *Echtra Fergusa maic Leiti* ("The Saga of Fergus mac Léti"), the king Fergus' face becomes permanently distorted by fear when he sees a lake monster. This story is set in Emain Macha rather than Tara, but Emain Macha also appears to have a *geis* on having a blemished king. Despite this *geis*, the nobility of the kingdom elects to keep Fergus in power on the condition that he hides from the common people so as not to reveal his shame. He is also kept hidden from "persons who might taunt him with his blemished face," but he is eventually discovered and mocked. After his discovery, Fergus returns to the lake monster and fights it to the death to reclaim his honor (Jaski 85). It is unclear whether Fergus' popularity keeps him in his position, or simply a lack of a competent replacement. The story ultimately ends in his death, but keeping Fergus as king and hiding him away buys Emain Macha seven years of capable but blemished king.

One particularly bizarre example of a blemished king's rule is in *Aided Chonchobuir*, in which Chonchobar mac Nessa continues his kingship after the calcified brain of Mes Gegra becomes lodged in the back of his skull. The presence of the brain gives Chonchobar a wrenched face that counts as a "blemish," but the Ulstermen elect to keep him in power in spite of it. The alternative is to attempt to remove the piece of brain, but that risks killing him, so they choose instead to have a blemished king with a "strange appearance" rather than no king at all (Jaski 85). Chonchobar also eventually succumbs to a death based on his blemish, when he falls dead from overexcitement after hearing about Christ's crucifixion (a fatal event because of his brain injury.) Like Fergus, Chonchobar rules for seven years after he sustains his physical defect. The number seven has numerological significance in a Biblical sense, but also, as Jaski suggests, "as the

normal tenure of clientship" (Jaski 86.) The Irish system of clientship entails a bond between lord and client that is based on a symbolic gift-giving. The duration of this bond is usually seven years, so perhaps blemished kings like Fergus and Chonchobar mac Nessa were kept as kings out of the obligations of clientship on behalf of the people. However, these blemished kings were an exception to the rule, and most kings who lose eyes or limbs in battle, especially in the earlier period, are made to step down permanently.

### **5. Prosthetics in medieval Irish literature: three cases**

Having established the importance of a corporally whole king and the bond between king and land in early Irish literature, I will turn to the idea of prosthetics as a means to circumvent damage done to the body in this tradition. The dictionary definition of a prosthetic is simply an "artificial body part." In this paper, I will employ a broader definition of the word "prosthetic" that includes our modern conception of man-made constructs to replace limbs, but also body parts that have been healed by magical means. More simply put, I will consider any non-natural body part used for the means of restoring bodily wholeness as a "prosthetic." The presence of prosthetics in medieval Irish literature points to the importance of physical wholeness and the lengths to which one will go to correct a "blemish," especially if one risks a kingship.

In *Tochmarc Étaíne*, Midir pays a visit to his foster-son, the Mac Óc, and is injured when he attempts to break up a fight between the young warriors of the boy-troop:

*Doluid Midir & a lethshuil ina durn docom an Meic Óic, & asbert fris: 'Ní má tudchadhsa do fhis scel uait, conam fil fo athais, sech ní rochim fon ainim a tir dorocht do imchaisin, & a tir oa tudchadh ní róás in fecht sa.'*

*'Bidh gó son, 'ol an Mac Óc. 'Raghasa có Dían Cecht co tudchaid dot íc, & bid lat do ferand fodein & bid lat an ferand sa, & bid slan do shuil cen athais cen ainim airi.' ...Doluid Dían Cecht & icais Midir corbó slán. (UCC Celt.)*

"Then Midir went; and it was not easy for him to separate them. A holly javelin was cast at Midir as he was intervening, so that it brought one of his eyes out of his head. Midir came to the Mac Óc with his eye in his hand, and said to him: 'It was no good thing for me to come to get news of you, since now I am shamed. For with this blemish I can not see the land in which I have arrived; and now I will not reach the land from which I have come.'

'That will not be true,' said the Mac Óc. 'I will go to Dian Cécht so that he may come to heal you, and you will have your own territory, and you will have this territory, and your eye will be whole without shame or blemish.' ... Dian Cécht came and healed Midir, so that he was whole." (Koch and Carey 148).

In this scene, Midir is immediately aware of the severity of his injury. As he holds his eye in his hand, he laments his ruin. Midir knows that the loss of his eye will bring him great shame that will result in a loss of status and make him ineligible to continue ruling. Even though a strong ancestry is important in early Ireland and Midir is the son of the Dagda, king of the Tuath Dé, it is not enough to compensate for a severe physical injury. The Mac Óc knows this as well, as he notes that Midir's own territory and any future territories are at risk if Dian Cécht is not able to restore his eye. Both Midir and the Mac Óc make mention of the shame the injury would bring Midir. Presumably, part of the shame of sustaining an injury in battle stems from the fact that it means one had been bested, which indicates a lack of physical strength or dexterity. It may have been additionally embarrassing for Midir if we consider that his injury occurred while breaking up a fight between young warriors instead of an actual wartime engagement. Overall,

we can conclude that physical blemishes are damning for a number of reasons: among them are a loss of divine favor, the flaw of weakness or lack of ability in combat, and the damage to one's reputation as a capable warrior.

Midir's dialogue about his inability to see the land around him can hold both literal and symbolic meaning after his injury. While he is literally unable to see from an empty eye-socket, there is also a loss of knowing the land he is visiting as he might have, which is as a ruler. His injury also precludes him from returning home- not in a literal sense, but in the sense that his missing eye prevents him from returning home in the same capacity. Midir cannot return to his homeland as he left it because he will no longer be its ruler upon his return. In that sense, he is not able to "reach the land from which [he] has come." When Dian Cécht fixes Midir's eye, he fixes Midir's sight and his ability to interact with his surroundings as king.

It is worth noting that Dian Cécht is the healer responsible for the restoration of both Midir's eye and Nuadu's amazing silver arm. The narrative does not explicitly state that Dian Cécht heals Midir through magical means, but Dian Cécht's status as one of the Tuath Dé, who are magical or supernatural by nature, leads us to believe that he possesses otherworldly abilities. In addition, Dian Cécht is able to heal Midir's injury in spite of its severity. by unnatural methods. The substitution works, and Midir is able to continue ruling.

The acceptance of Midir's magical eye leads me to conclude that the shame of incurring a physical injury can be avoided if one can prove one's cleverness in solving the problem. Medieval Irish literature places an emphasis on the value of a quick wit, as can be seen through the multitude of verbal contests in early Irish texts. One example of outsmarting an opponent comes from within *Tochmarc Étaíne*, when the Mac Óc threatens Elcmar's life in exchange for "kingship in his territory for a day and a night" (Koch and Carey 147). The next day, he refuses

to cede the territory back to Elcmar, and when petitioned, the Dagda lets the Mac Óc keep it because "it is in days and nights that the world is spent" (Koch and Carey 147). The victory over Elcmar is considered fair because not only had the Mac Óc been clever enough to make Elcmar give up his land to him, but Elcmar had been foolish enough to allow him to take it. In this situation, there was no sense of foul play on the part of the Mac Óc. It was a contest won through superior strategy.

The same cultural perspective can be applied to the healing of Midir's eye. Midir's injury should represent a lack of something, whether it be judgement or martial ability or divine favor, as we have seen that physical wholeness is often an indicator of some greater character trait. The loss of Midir's eye damages him physically and in reputation. However, the fact that he is able to accomplish the impossible task of replacing his eye indicates the wit and resourcefulness that is held in high esteem by the early Irish. As the healer of the Tuath Dé, the fact that Dian Cécht attempts to restore Midir already attests to his social standing. Having an eye magically made new implies wealth, the cleverness to know how to solve the problem, and social connectedness. These are certainly kingly attributes, and they appear to compensate for whatever personal shame initially losing the eye had brought. Alternatively, perhaps there is a sense that the damage that had been done had been *un-done*, but the ideas of sacral kingship seem to support a symbolic interpretation of blemished kings that extends beyond merely the damage to their physical attractiveness. We can conclude then that prostheses were an acceptable means of creative problem-solving to correct for an injury that did not result in a loss of status or one's kingdom. After his eye is replaced by Dian Cécht, Midir is able to continue ruling despite the harm previously done to his wholeness.

There is less description given in the instance of Nuadu Argatlám and his silver arm. The only narration of this event comes from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, which reads:

*“Nuadu Argetlām trā ba rī do Tuāthaib Dē Donann secht mbliadna re tiachtain dō ib in Erinn, co talladh a lām de hi cēt cath Muigi Tuiredh... Argatlām iarom, fiche bliadan. Lām argait, co lān-lūth cacha lāma in cach meōr in cach alt do rach fair Dīan Cecht in liaig, & Creidne cerd i congnam fris”* (Macalister 112-115.)

"Nuadu Argatlám, then, was king of the Tuath Dé Donann for seven years before coming to Ireland, until his arm was cut off in the first battle of Mag Tuired...Bres son of Elatha took the kingship of Ireland after that, until Nuadu's arm was healed at the end of seven years; then Nuadu Argatlám ruled for twenty years. Dian Cécht the physician, helped by Creidne the artisan, put a silver arm on him, with the full vigour of an arm in every finger and in every joint" (Koch and Carey 253).

The situation with Nuadu is similar to that of Midir: a king sustains a physical injury that disqualifies him from the kingship until the damaged body part is artificially restored. Nuadu had a seven year long career as king before his arm was severed, and like other kings who were dethroned after an injury, his previous performance as a ruler or any heroic deeds are forgotten. For the land of Ireland to be whole, the king needs to be whole, so Nuadu was no longer a viable representative. Like Midir, Nuadu was restored to wholeness by the physician Dian Cécht, this time in collaboration with the artisan Creidne, and he is able to return to ruling the Tuath Dé Donann until his death. Nuadu's silver arm fits more closely the modern definition of a prosthesis: it is a man-made construction meant to replace a lost body part. However, even this more literal prosthetic appears to require a degree of magic. The individual fingers and joints are fully functional, so even though the arm is crafted from metal, there is no loss of ability. The

language of the arm's description is slightly ambiguous, and the arm can perhaps be interpreted as having more strength than a natural arm with the "full vigour of an arm in every finger." At any rate, the silver arm is at least as functional, if not more so, than a biological arm, which renders him physically whole.

The major difference between Nuadu's silver arm prosthesis and Midir's restored eye is that the silver arm is obviously artificial. One could potentially argue that Midir is able to return to the kingship after his eye is healed because other than Dian Cécht and the Mac Óc, no one would be the wiser that he had been severely injured. This is impossible to argue in the case of Nuadu, because his arm prosthetic is very clearly a man-made construct. The apparent artificiality of the arm is noteworthy because it betrays the massive injury done to the king and signifies that at one point Nuadu had not been physically whole. In this circumstance, why such a substitution is acceptable despite its evident unnaturalness becomes of particular interest.

A contributing factor to the consideration of the silver prosthetic as a replacement limb is likely its life-like nature. Although it is not made from biological material, the arm has complete functionality in its fingers and joints, which makes it more than just an arm-shaped prop. It seems unlikely that Nuadu would have been considered being of bodily wholeness if he had an unoperational alternative, just as if Midir had had a glass or wooden eye. The utility of the prosthetic means that many of the practical repercussions of losing an arm, such as the deprivation of martial prowess, are not a concern. Full capability of the arm is retained through the accuracy of its movements and Nuadu loses no functionality.

It is also possible that the artistry of the silver arm contributes to the acceptance of it as a replacement. The *Lebor Gabala* hints at the quality of the arm by naming Creidne, an artisan is involved in process of building it. The arm is both medically accurate due to the expertise of

Dian Cécht, and is likely aesthetically beautiful and high-quality due to the influence of the artisan. The kingly luxury of the arm, both in its being made of silver and its craftsmanship, may be a factor in the restitution of Nuadu's status as "whole" after its attachment. Perhaps the "luck" and favor that had been taken from Nuadu because of his injury could be said to have been returned because of the wealth necessary to build an entire arm out of silver. Wealth is often noted among the attributes that a ideal king should have, as we see in the description of Conaire Mór in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ("The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel"): "There is not a fault in that man...as regards armour and apparel and equipment, as regards beauty and wealth and worth" (Jaski 82). A king is clearly expected to look the part by having arms and armor that befit his station, and Nuadu's arm being made out of silver by an artisan ensures that his prosthetic matches his rank.

So far, the prostheses that have restored kings to their standing as physically whole are the magical replacement of the Midir's eye, and the clearly artificial but regal and operational silver arm. The final example that I will address in this paper is the case of Cethern son of Fintan in the *Táin*. This circumstance is different from the others in that it does not involve a king, but instead one of the warriors of Ulster. Because Cethern is a warrior rather than a king, he is not concerned with loss of title, though he still stands to lose social status. As with our royal examples, Cethern's reputation is at risk as a result of the physical injuries he has incurred. One major distinction as a warrior is that his bodily wholeness does not have implications for anyone other than himself, but Cethern is determined to return to the fray as a matter of personal pride:

*“Is ed ón barróega Cethern mac Fintain, dergleges téora lá & teora n-aidchi, go n-imred fein a nert for a námtib, dáig issed ra ráidestar-som, na faigbed dá éis nech bud ferr leis dá athe nó da dígail andás badessin.”*

"what Cethern son of Fintan chose was a red healing for the space of three days and three nights, to the end that he might then vent his anger and strength on his enemies. For what he said was that there would not be found after him any one he would rather have vindicate or avenge him than himself" (Dunn 273). Cethern chooses an agonizing "red" healing at the hands of the physician Fingan rather than a drawn-out recovery in order to avenge himself against Medb and Ailill. This brief but brutal healing will allow him to prove his physical strength against his enemies and die with honor.

Fingan's ritual for healing Cethern is described as follows:

*"Is and-sin conattacht Fingin Fathliaig smiramair for Coinculaind do ícc & do leigess Chethirn meic Fintain. Tanic Cuchulaind reme i n-dúnud & illongphort fer n-hErend, & na fúair d'almaib & d'éitib & d'indilib and, tuc leis ass íat. Acus dogní smiramair díb eter féoil & chnámaib & lethar, agus tucad Cethern mac Fintain sin smiramair, co cend teora lá & teora n-aidche. Acus ra gab ac ól na smiramrach imme. Acus ra luid in smiramair and eter a chnedaib & eter a chreachtaib, dar a áltaib & dar a ilgonaib. And-sin atracht-som assin smiramair i cind teora lá & teora n-aidche. Acus issamlaid attracht & clár a charpait re broind, ar ná tuitted a fobach & a inathar ass"* (Windisch.)

"Thereupon Fingin the prophetic physician asked of Cuchulain a vat of marrow wherewith to heal and to cure Cethern son of Fintan...he made a marrow-mesh of their flesh and their bones and their skins; and Cethern son of Fintan was placed in the marrow-bath till the end of three days and three nights. And his flesh began to drink in the marrow-bath about him and the marrow-bath entered in within his stabs and his cuts, his sores and his many wounds. Thereafter he arose from the marrow-bath at the end of three days and three nights. It was thus Cethern

arose, with a slab of the chariot pressed to his belly so that his entrails and bowels would not drop out of him." (Dunn 273).

Cethern's restoration process is fascinating because it combines the two different kinds of prostheses that we have seen so far: the biologically-based healing of Midir's eye and the artificial silver arm made for Nuadu. In this scene, Cethern's body appears to absorb natural material from the marrow bath to heal his wounds. The marrow comes from the flesh, bones, and skins from the flocks of Ireland that Cú Chulainn had slain for this purpose, and their biology adds to Cethern's own. His flesh drinks in the animal marrow and he is restored from the inside. It takes three full days for his flesh to regenerate to compensate for the wounds, but Cethern is left whole enough to fight. At the end of the bath, Cethern's flesh and bones derive much of their physical material from the substituted animal material that Cú Chulainn had retrieved.

The more literal prosthetic appears in the end of the passage when Cethern scavenges chariot parts in order to hold himself together for the coming battle. He uses a piece of a chariot's side as a prosthetic abdomen to keep his intestines as part of his corporeal form. Unlike the marrow-bath, the substitute torso is built from outside material and blends man-made construct with Cethern's natural anatomy. There is no notion of whether or not Cethern is considered physically whole after the implementation of the chariot parts, but this prosthesis appears to do its job, as Cethern is killed on the battlefield by his enemies rather than his entrails spilling out of their own accord. The matter of Cethern's wholeness is incidental because nothing depends on his unblemished status, unlike Midir and Nuadu, who stand to lose kingdoms. Cethern's substitutions of both animal marrow and wood and metal as prostheses echo the idea of pairing magical-medicinal means of healing with the incorporation of mechanical and artificial elements.

## 6. Evidence of medieval prostheses

Although there is little surviving archaeological evidence of ancient prosthetic technology, scholars attest that they were used in the Ancient Egyptian and Ancient Greek empires based on scant archaeological finds and iconographic sources. Any physical evidence of prosthetics before the sixteenth century, especially in medieval Europe, is incredibly rare. The scarcity of extant examples is part of what makes the 2013 discovery of a Frankish period skeleton buried with remains of a prosthetic foot a matter of particular scholarly interest. The features of the grave find were detailed as follows in the *International Journal of Paleopathology*: "the middle adult male was missing his left foot from above the ankle. In its place, an iron-ring and wooden remains were recovered and interpreted as a prosthesis replacing the lost foot" (Binder 29). Further analysis of the bones shows a survival of up to seven years after the amputation of the leg, likely with the use of the wooden prosthetic. The journal article indicates that the prosthetic was used with some success due to "osteoarthritis in the knees and shoulder girdle [which] provides tentative indications towards the functionality of the prosthesis, perhaps aided through a crutch." Osteoarthritis occurring in those joints specifically suggests that the user was adapting their posture for the use of a crutch, which they used for long enough that the shoulder and knees were impacted through constant wear.

This sixth century wood and iron construction found in a grave in Hemmaberg, Austria- though not made of artisanal silver- provides a rare early example of a prosthesis and proves a rudimentary knowledge of the practice in medieval Europe. The article in the *International Journal of Paleopathology* even concludes that the incorporation of this prosthesis was successful, as it allowed its user to live many years after the amputation of his left ankle with continued mobility. The evidence is inconclusive as far as the reason for the amputation, though

the article posits several possibilities. The amputation could have been performed in a medical context to stem the tide of an injury or infection. The amputation on the man from Hemmaberg appears to have been cut through the long bones of his leg rather than conforming to the contemporary practice of exarticulation (cutting through the joints), but this alone cannot confirm that the procedure was not medical (Binder 39). Other hypotheses for the amputation's cause include the foot being removed through some kind of natural accident, or its removal for a crime in accordance with medieval Frankish law codes. The type and location of the Hemmaberg man's burial site suggests against his being a criminal because he seems to have been afforded traditional burial rites in addition to a grave site of some prominence, though it is impossible to know for certain. At any rate, the evidence of a lifespan of several years after the amputation indicates a successful procedure, and the prosthesis and the visible impacts of crutch-use on the bones points towards ambulatory function after the foot's removal.

## **7. Chapter Conclusion**

So what are the consequences of this artifact's discovery on our interpretation of prostheses in medieval Irish literature? Primarily, I wish to suggest that although we often connote prosthetics with modern medicine, they were known to a number of ancient and medieval peoples with whom the Irish interacted including the Franks and the Romans. The acceptance of prostheses contributing to one's "wholeness" in the literature could indicate an incorporation of the knowledge of this medical procedure in to the Irish worldview. In the examples of prostheses that I have noted from the corpus of medieval Irish literature, all three mention the role of a physician in their application, perhaps hinting at knowledge of the nature of the procedure. Additionally, a culture that emphasizes physical wholeness might find it necessary

to account for the possible exceptions to the general rule in their stories. Though I am not advocating for a purely literal interpretation of the examples I have discussed, they should not be dismissed as acts of fantasy or as a magical *deus ex machina*. The appearance of prostheses may instead be taken as a hint towards a cultural knowledge of their existence. I don't mean to suggest that the presence of prostheses in Irish literature indicates their use in Irish medicine- there is not yet any archaeological evidence to support this- merely that the knowledge of such a procedure in other cultures may have permeated the Irish imagining.

The medieval Irish importance placed on a king's wholeness points towards greater cultural ideas such as a tradition of sacral kingship and a belief in the ruler's connection to the land itself. Therefore, the selection of the right king was crucial to ensuring successful harvests and a peaceful existence. The right king could be determined by bodily wholeness and beauty of appearance, in addition to an impressive ancestry and a strong reputation. These were all considered marks of divine favor and point towards one's status as a "true" king; however, if these are lost, one's favor and luck are lost just as easily. As an avatar for his people, misfortune befalling the king is considered an ill omen, and more often than not signals the end of his rule. There are some exceptions, such as the story *Echtra Fergusa maic Leiti*, in which Fergus is kept as king (though hidden away) after his face is blemished by fear.

Misfortune, such as an injury or a blow to one's reputation through satire, was considered a "blemish" upon the king. Blemishedness was a status found in Irish legal codes and seems to have been an important cultural institution especially in regards to the kingship. The category of being without a blemish, or being *dianim*, was a legal category that in practice appears to have had some fluidity, based on characters' ability to return across category boundaries by means of magic or a replacement body part. I have examined a few intriguing exceptions to the

requirement of bodily wholeness that involve the use of prostheses to circumvent the physical standards of kingship. These prostheses can be the restoration or creation of a new body part, as was the case of Midir's eye, or a completely artificial construct made from unnatural material, as with Nuadu's silver arm. The warrior Cethern incorporates both biological elements absorbed from animal marrow and man-made parts scrapped from a chariot to restore himself to fighting form. In all of these circumstances, the characters stand to be shamed and greatly lose social renown because of their physical afflictions, and they instead choose these unorthodox methods of self-restoration to preserve their status.

The acceptance of these prosthetics as a return to wholeness is likely based on the medieval Irish emphasis placed on cleverness that appears in much of the literature. The use of prostheses in the cases of Midir, Nuadu, and Cethern are a result of resourcefulness, well-connectedness, and material wealth, which have inherent social value and could aid in proving one's "truth." The text finds it worth mentioning that the arm of Nuadu is made of silver and represents the work of a known artisan, in addition to being fully functional, which surely is a feat of engineering. Both Midir and Nuadu are able to continue their kingship after the incorporation of their prostheses, even though in Nuadu's case he had been deposed for seven years before returning. If the lack of physical flaws is a mark of divine favor under sacral kingship, then perhaps the return to wholeness by means of a clever prosthesis after being blemished is even more so.

#### IV. “GOOD SEASONS AND PEACE” AS EVIDENCE FOR GERMANIC SACRAL KINGSHIP IN THE OLD NORSE *HEIMSKRINGLA*

##### 1. Syncretic Scandinavia

Most of the Old Norse kings to whom the principles of sacral kingship seem to apply and who I will discuss in this paper lived in pre-Conversion Scandinavia (the rulers Domaldi and Halfdan the Black) or in periods of transition (such as Magnus in 12<sup>th</sup> century Norway.) Sacral kingship is often thought to be purely a pre-Christian concept, but it is possible that the influence and principles of this kind of kingship lingered after conversion, as did other cultural remnants of the Germanic pagan past. I have argued that this is the case for Anglo-Saxon England, but the tenacity of pre-Christian ideals in medieval Scandinavia is undeniable. Pre-Christian and post-Conversion become thorny categories in the history of the Old Norse, considering that the exact moment of conversion is difficult to pinpoint and old beliefs were held longer in rural areas. This becomes important when considering the influence that Snorri Sturluson, the famous Christian Icelander who preserved many of the sagas, may have had in the act of recording. While I do not want to dedicate much time to hypothesizing how Snorri's often syncretic perspective factors in to the transmission of pagan stories, I would like to suggest that deeply-ingrained cultural concepts are often pervasive, and their presence in the *Ynglingasaga* and others are not made impossible by the perspective of their author.

##### 2. The misfortune of Domaldi

Perhaps the clearest example of the principles of sacral kingship being implemented in

Old Norse literature that will serve as a baseline for this paper comes from the *Ynglingasaga* and the story of the king Domaldi. Domaldi was a 4<sup>th</sup> century Swedish king whose reign was marked by periods of severe famine that caused much unrest in his kingdom. To remedy the poor harvests, his people sacrificed oxen in a grand ceremony in Upsala, but the crop yields did not improve (Monsen 10). On the following harvest, they sacrificed men, but the crop was "the same or even worse." The story is told as follows: "*Þá áttu höfðingjar ráðagerð sína; ok kom þat ásamt með þeim, at hallærit mundi standa af Dómalda konungi þeirra, ok þat með, at þeir skyldu honum blóta til árs sér; ok veita honum atgöngu ok drepa hann, ok rjóða stalla með blóði hans*" (Linder and Haggson.)

"The chieftains took counsel, and held to a man that Domaldi their king must be the cause of the bad seasons and also that they should have to sacrifice him in order to have a good season, that they should bear their weapons against him and kill him and dye the altars with his blood. And so they did" (Monsen 10-11).

Their sacrifice is successful, and Domaldi's death leads to the return of bountiful harvests and ends the famine.

Domaldi's death being the price to restore successful crop yields to the kingdom matches William A. Chaney's definition of Germanic sacral kingship, which he outlines as a "belief in the dependence of the fruits of the earth on the king's right relationship with the divine" (Chaney 86). A king's divine favor should ordinarily be marked by agricultural success and peacetime during his time as ruler. As a result of this cultural conception of the functions of an ideal king, the citizens of Sweden assume that the famine was a result of Domaldi's lack "trueness" or "righteousness" as a king, and the vote to kill him is unanimous. This suggests a widespread understanding of the root cause of the famine. Domaldi had failed in his role of being the

mediary between their society and nature and nature and the divine (Jaski 57). Again, one can see these sentiments echoed in Alcuin's letter to Aethelred: a good harvest is directly tied to the righteousness of the king. Poor harvests and other forms of unrest are therefore an indicator that the king has lost his luck and must be replaced.

Because of their role as an avatar of the kingdom itself, sacral kings were expected to clearly display a sense of divine favor. The reason for Domaldi's distinct lack of favor is given earlier in *Ynglingasaga*: his step-mother had worked "witchcraft" on him to bring him *ósgæssa*, or "ill-luck" (Monsen 10). Words associated with the concepts of luck or unluckiness are often used to discuss sacral kingship, so the mention of Domaldi's *ósgæssa* is clear foreshadowing of his misfortune as a king. I am reminded again of Paul Beekman Taylor's study of the Old English words surrounding the ideas of sacral kingship in his article "The Language of Sacral Kingship in *Beowulf*." One can be marked by both good or bad luck (which can also be conceived of as one's degree of divine favor) in the text. For example, Beowulf often praises his great luck (*estum*) when he finds victory in battle: *We þæt ellenweorc estum miclum/ feohtan fremedon* ("We performed bold work in fight with great favor/luck," borrowing Beekman Taylor's translation of lines 958-959 on p.131.) In this way, righteousness and unrighteousness often manifest in the degrees of luck that one possesses. This correlation appears to hold true for Old Norse literature, as well: Domaldi's reign is cursed by his "ill-luck" that ultimately leads to his sacrifice, whereas Halfdan the Black- a paragon of what a sacral king should be- was said to be "most fortunate" in having good seasons (Monsen 42).

Bettina Sejbjerg Sommer writes about the Old Norse words for luck that appear in the sagas in her article "The Norse Concept of Luck." Similar to Beekman Taylor's article, she examines the linguistic evidence present in the literature to seek out how "luck" was culturally

understood. She posits that more often than not, luck was considered “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 success” (Sommer 275.) This definition of luck echoes the idea of luck being a mark of favor, whether it is the favor of a deity or the machinations of fate. It is one’s cause of success because someone with “luck” would be more able to achieve greatness based on his build, talent, etc. Sommer’s article mostly focuses on how Norse society viewed those without luck, but she does mention the unique way in which kings were thought to possess it: “kings especially were great men of luck to the degree that they were able to send forth their luck to assist others” (Sommer 275.) This upholds the idea of the contract between the sacral king and his people that we have seen thus far. A king’s luck was extraordinarily powerful in that it was something that could be distributed to his people, in a form that they could benefit from, as we have seen in their expectation of good harvests.

### **3. The Ynglings’ legacy of luck**

Removing the ill-fated Domaldi corrects the tenuous relationship between the people of Upsala and the production of the fields. The bad luck of the king is apparently not rooted in lineage, as Domaldi's son, Domar, does not experience the same bad fortune as his father. Domaldi’s “lucky” lineage (that of the Ynglings) is corrupted and un-done by the curse of his step-mother. This makes Domaldi’s ill-luck a personal, rather than familial, problem. In fact, his son Domar seems to be a successful sacral king, in that he was able to "rule for a long time" because "there were good seasons and peace in his days" (Monsen 11.) Upon his death, Domar was burned as part of his funerary rites on the riverbank beside his standing-stone. His post-mortem treatment as a successful, though unremarkable, king (the *Ynglingasaga* says other than

the good seasons, "about him nothing else is told" (Monsen 11)) obviously differs from the slaughter of Domaldi at the hands of his people.

It is important to note that the *Ynglingasaga* begins with a genealogy that connects the Ynglings to literal divinity, and notes that the namesake of their line is the deity Frey. The dynasty's name was derived from Frey's second name "Yngvi," so that "his kinsmen were afterwards called Ynglings" (Monsen 7). This adds another layer to the cultural need for the descendants of the Ynglings to affect divinity in their appearance and performance in battle. Halfdan the Black, through his innate physical qualities and his deeds as a young man, establishes himself as a true successor for the divine heritage of the Ynglings, with Domaldi as a clear counterpoint. The cause of the sacrifice of Domaldi by his people- the curse of ill-luck that his stepmother afflicted him with- suggests that righteousness is not innate or inherited from one's lineage, but is something that is gained through deeds and can be lost just as easily.

Then what purpose does this link to a divine lineage serve, if it does not always signify one's legitimacy as a king? Perhaps the legend of the ruling family's connection to the Norse pantheon simply worked to establish that the king should be uniquely positioned to successfully act as a mediator of divinity on behalf of his kingdom. In that sense, failure to achieve prosperity for one's people could be viewed as even more egregious. In fact, Frey, the founder of the Ynglings, seems to be the origin of sacral kingship in his family line: upon his death, the Swedes "marked that Frey was dead, but that good seasons and peace still continued...as long as Frey was in Sweden; therefore they would not burn him, but called him god of the earth, and ever after sacrificed to him, most of all for good seasons and peace" (Monsen 8). Peace and good seasons, which imply good harvests as a result of mild weather, are the most prevalent markers of a good king in the *Heimskringla*. Frey was able to procure these things for his people just by

the presence of his body in the country, and his descendants were also able to possess that power if they were righteous enough- including King Halfdan, whom I will discuss momentarily. In Frey's story, it is important to note first: that the locus of Frey's "luck" and power is his physical body, and second: that lord and land continue to be connected even after death. The role of mediator that I have already discussed puts the king in communication with the divine, his people, and the land, and the permanent landed-ness of his body is necessary to continue that relationship.

#### **4. Halfdan the Black**

Halfdan the Black, a 9th century king of Norway, serves as a contrast to Domaldi as an example of a "true" king who is successful in upholding his sacral duties. Instead of being marked by a curse of bad luck, the young Halfdan is strong, handsome, and often victorious in battle (Monsen 36). Traits like physical beauty and large physical size were thought to be signs of favor and luck (Jaski 82), so Halfdan is posed from the beginning of his story as someone who could bring similar fortune to his people. Among his other deeds are claiming more territory for his own kingdom and acquiring a noble and impressive wife named Ragnhild, all of which suggest the kind of "prosperity of the whole folk" that Alcuin mentions in his letter as a result of a righteous ruler. To again quote a passage from the *Ynglingasaga* that I referenced earlier, Halfdan was "of all the kings...the most fortunate one in having good seasons" (Monsen 42). Halfdan's life was marked by accomplishments, but the bountiful crop yields during his reign endear him to his people the most. "All loved [Halfdan] highly" as a result of the harvests he was able to ensure for them. He was so beloved that after his death at age forty that his body was claimed by multiple local leaders:

*“Svá mikit gerðu menn sér um hann, at þá er þat spurðist, at hann var dauðr, ok lík hans var flutt á Hringaríki ok var þar til graptar ætlat, þá fóru ríkismenn af Raumaríki ok Vestfold ok Heiðmörk ok beiddust allir at hafa líkit með sér ok heygja í sínu fylki, ok þótti þat vera árvænt þeim er næði. En þeir sættust svá, at líkinu var skipt í fjóra staði, ok var höfuðit lagit í haug at Steini á Hringaríki, en hverir fluttu heim sinn hluta ok heygðu, ok eru þat alt kallaðir Hálfðanar haugar” (Jónsson.)*

"All loved him so highly that, when they learned he was dead and his body was being taken to Ringerik (where they would give him a grave), the great men of Raumarik and Vestfold and Hedemark went there and they all demanded his body for themselves to lay it in a howe in their own district, for they expected good seasons if they had the body. Finally it was agreed that they should divide the body into four parts, and the head was laid at a howe in Stein in Ringerik, whilst each of the others took home his part and laid it in a howe, and all of these howes were called Halfdan's-howes" (Monsen 42.)

The conflict over who gets to claim Halfdan the Black's body is not rooted merely in admiration for him, but also in the expectation that his "luck" was both connected to his physical body even after death and transferrable to those who possess it, as it had been with the body of Frey. This again raises the idea of a sacral king's divine favor or luck being attached to the corporeal form. The land itself is also a factor in the dissemination of the body's luck: the place where the bodies of Frey and Halfdan rest, even in pieces, will benefit from the good relationship with nature that the king himself was able to ensure. This is why multiple villages vie for possession of even a piece of Halfdan's corpse. The desire for the powerful fragments of the dead king's form is strongly reminiscent of the collection and burial of the body of King Oswald, whose head and body are interred separately in places of great significance. Bede tells the story

of the literal power of Oswald's relics when he relays that after the monks at Bardney Abbey declined to receive the head from Osthryth, the bones were bathed in a pillar of light that reached up in to the night sky: "*sed miraculi caelestis ostensio, quam reuerenter eae suscipiendae a cunctis fidelibus essent, patefecit. Nam tota ea nocta columna lucis a carro illo ad caelum usque porrecta omnibus pene eiusdem Lidissae prouinciae locis conspicua stabat*" (Colgrave and Mynors 247.) The monks were properly embarrassed, and received the relics the next day.

## **5. Magnus the Blind**

There are a few examples of a physically injured king being unable to rule after his injury in the *Heimskringla* that suggests the bodily understanding of "luck," and is similar in many ways to how Bart Jaski defines Irish "blemishedness" (although with some key differences that I will examine shortly.) The need for an Old Norse king to be more often than not physically whole, in addition to often being attractive or well-pedigreed, are indicative of one's luck as it is displayed in the body. "The History of Magnus the Blind" tells how King Magnus of Norway was taken prisoner and badly wounded by King Harald Gilli during a civil war. King Harald's forces blind, castrate, and hobble Magnus in order to depose him as king. The language of the passage suggests the influence of sacral kingship [after he was taken prisoner]: "it was agreed that Magnus should lose his kingdom in such a way that he could never afterwards be called 'king'" (Monsen 650.) However, it is interesting to note that Magnus is not killed, as one might expect. His injuries, non-lethal though they may be, bring a great degree of shame to his physical body- especially castration, which robs him of his masculinity in a very literal way. Magnus' blindness is a practical obstruction to his kingship, but it is also an obvious marker of "unluckiness" and lack of divine favor, in addition to his defeat in combat. The text implies that

part of Magnus' inability to rule is due to the shame associated with his injuries.

In this scenario, Harald disables Magnus to disqualify him from the kingship in the cultural perception of what a king should be. His "luck" as a ruler has been lost through his being maimed, and the shame of his blinding and castration surely factor in to his inability to ever after be called "king." Applying Jaski's work on "blemished" versus "non-blemished" status in Irish kingship to Old Norse culture becomes complicated, though, by the presence of a variety of blemished deities in the native pagan religion, not the least of which is the one-eyed god Odin. However, there does seem to be some sort of stigma attached to the act of disabling another person. William Ian Miller discusses the Norse cultural attitudes surrounding the variety of ways to maim one's enemy in the family sagas, including castration and the amputation of hands and legs (Miller 196.) Miller notes that "the uneven distribution of these incidents [maimings] between the two types of saga seems to suggest the existence of a norm against it, but clearly not strong enough to prevent its frequent breach" (Miller 196.) The stigma against mutilations seems to be related to the Germanic concept of *wergild*, because the disdain towards mutilation in these sagas tends to be related to the class or status of the one being maimed. The word *níðingsverk*, which Miller translates as a "reprehensible and shameless action," is a term used in the saga to describe cutting off a sick man's hand or an old man's leg (Miller 196.) However, Miller's work suggests that the "shameless-ness" of maiming an already injured or elderly person stems from their status as a socially and/or physically weak person.

This disdain towards injuring the elderly or disabled does not extend towards the body of the king. The king was mired in the social expectation that he had to fight to maintain his legitimacy, which was a state that one could gain or lose at any time (Miller 219). The case of Magnus the Blind in particular feeds in to Miller's suggestion that violence present in political

action was “cased in the idiom of honor and the avenging of perceived wrongs” (Miller 219.) Magnus was victim of a number of mutilations that may in other circumstances be considered “reprehensible,” but because he was engaged in a civil war with Harald Gilli, the violence against him becomes part of a system of revenge and justified retribution. It is perhaps the damage to Magnus’ legitimacy, rather than his physical body, that removes him from the kingship of Norway.

## **6. The Old Norse conception of “disability”**

John P. Sexton discusses the treatment of disability in the sagas as it relates to Old Norse naming conventions in his essay “Difference and Disability: On the Logic of Naming in the Icelandic Sagas.” Sexton notes the “number and variety” of impaired individuals- even represented in the pantheon by individuals like Odin, Hod, and Thor- in the sagas based on a culture that emphasizes battle and is set in a harsh environment (Sexton 149.) Sexton details one example in particular from *Grettis saga* of a man named Onund *tréfótr*, or “tree-foot,” named so after his wooden peg-leg. Sexton presents a nuanced interpretation of disability in this story, noting that “Onund’s amputated leg and its wooden replacement were, to a saga audience, not automatic or quantifiable diminutions of a formerly ‘whole’ ...body; they were, instead, signals of a body requiring interpretation” (Sexton 163.) Sexton suggests the lack of an understanding in the Norse conception that a body that is not “whole” or “able” is inherently bad. For Onund *tréfótr*, his body requires “interpretation” because his injury does not “overwhelm his effectiveness as a fighting man and landowner,” but in this case, becomes part of his story as a warrior (Sexton 163.)

The Norse conception of disability appears more varied and complex than the binary of

“blemished” versus “unblemished.” Onund *tréfótr* is able to continue his career as a warrior after his injury, although Magnus the Blind is removed from the kingship after he is mutilated. Again, Magnus’ disability seems to be colored by his social status as a king. It seems likely that Magnus’ blindness and maiming, because of his position of power, has far-reaching consequences for his people, based on the understanding of the king as a mediator for his kingdom. There appears to be no social injunction or law against a disabled leader in Norse society, as there is in medieval Irish culture; however, the issue of “luck” or favor is still important to the matter of Norse kingship. The circumstances of Magnus’ injury display a clear lack of luck, because he had been defeated in battle by Harald and taken as a prisoner, and injured as a mark of shame or defeat.

## **7. Chapter Conclusion**

Norse sacral kingship in the *Heimskringla*, based on a few prominent examples such as Domaldi and Halfdan the Black, is characterized by the expectation of the people that a king be marked by “luck” or a sense of being blessed by fate. A king’s “luck” appears to have been demonstrated in lineage (which the Ynglings trace back to the deity Frey), physical appearance, and victory in battle, among other things. The “true-ness” of a king manifests as *ár ok frið*, or “abundance and peace,” that he is able to procure for his people. The lack of these things is punishable by death, as we have seen with the sacrifice of king Domaldi of Upsala, who is killed in an attempt to stop the famine that was devastating Sweden. By that same token, Halfdan the Black was memorialized in a number of burial mounds called “Halfdan’s howes” after his death because of his constant ability to ensure bountiful harvests for his people. The concern with where the bodies of both Frey and Halfdan the Black are placed after their deaths suggested a

belief that a sacral king's "luck" is to some extent rooted in the corporeal form. Although, Domaldi's curse of "ill-luck" that led to his demise and the dethroning of Magnus the Blind after his shameful defeat in battle stand as examples that the nature of favor is that it can be gained and lost. Norse sacral kings were responsible for serving as a go-between for their kingdom and the often harsh natural world and ensuring the "prosperity of the whole folk" through their right relationship with the forces of fortune.

## V. CONCLUSION

Kings in Anglo-Saxon, Irish, and Norse societies in the early Middle Ages occupied a special role as not only the top of the social hierarchy, but also as an emissary between their people and the divine forces of nature- forces which could provide good harvests or punish with harsh winters. The figure of the king appears to have been subject to an understanding that their bodies were the home of a source of power and righteousness that enabled this mediation, and as a result, were subject to increased regulation and unusual burial practices. These theories may provide a reason as to why Edwin and Oswald of Northumbria had their heads and bodies separately interred, thereby increasing the number of burial locations associated with their bodily luck. In the Irish literary corpus there are a number of stories like the *Tochmarc Étaíne* and the tale of Nuadu in the *Lebor Gabala* that express concern about kings who are injured- and therefore display a visible lack divine favor- ruling in Ireland. The use of prostheses is apparently sufficient to undo the negative stigma of injury. The connections of kings to their physical kingdoms is shared between Old Irish and Old Norse traditions, although this manifests more literally in Old Irish literature due to the figure of the sovereignty goddess. In the Old Norse *Ynglingasaga*, the Yngling kings are either beloved or reviled based on their ability to secure natural blessings. The most successful among them is Halfdan the Black, whose body is divided in to fourths and given to the major villages of his kingdom as a result.

Taking a comparative approach to medieval literature can reveal how different cultural conceptions, like the idea of markedly special bodies, may have been in conversation with one

another. National borders were much less rigid in the medieval era than in the modern day, and work in the subject of medieval studies would benefit from exploring how ideas and texts may have crossed in and out of neighboring cultural zones- especially in areas of extreme cross-cultural exchange, like Northumbria. Simply put, reading literature with a comparative approach acknowledges the geographic reality of places like the medieval British Isles. It is especially important to acknowledge the conversation between cultures when we have evidence that people groups such as the medieval Irish and the Northumbrians had an exchange of diplomats and monastics during Oswald's reign, or that the Norse raided and even briefly settled swaths of land in both England and Ireland.

I feel the benefits of a comparative approach have become clear in this project. Understanding the Irish literary symbolism of the power of the human skull and putting it in conversation with Oswald's burial, with the knowledge that he had strong connections to Ireland, allows us to consider how this cultural exchange could have affected the treatment of his disembodied head. Looking at what the Irish literary corpus has to say about bodily wholeness (in regards to kingship and prostheses) provides an interesting framework with which we can look at Old Norse texts that deal with what it means to be "whole," and additionally reveals that cultures that have a category of disability do not necessarily react to that category in the same way. The Old Norse commentary on the lineage of the Ynglings in the *Ynglingasaga* provides us an idea of what pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon kingship may have looked like, based on shared ideas of "luckiness" being tied to kings' bodies. There are interesting bridges and similarities between Old Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Old Norse ideas on royal bodies, disability, and even prostheses that are only revealed when read alongside one another. I have begun such a study here, but there is much room for further exploration.

One future project that could derive from this thesis is an analysis of the physical spaces where king's bodies were housed. In what way might the architectural elements of these burial sites signify meaning for the bodies? In the case of the burial mounds of Halfdan the Black, do the sites of the mounds have significance outside of being a grave location- such as local folklore, proximity to water, or religious connotations? A project of this kind would also be open to work in place-name studies, with interest to cataloguing the names of the burial places of kings and identifying any trends in the naming conventions. I would also be interested in including hagiography and other religious literature in future incarnations of this project, though the scope of this thesis was necessarily limited. There are an abundance of texts about miraculous and productive saint's bodies, and though my interests lie more with the bodies of kings, there are a number of saints like Oswald and Edmund who fulfilled a dual role. It would be interesting to see if the bodies of kings who are also saints are written about or conceived of differently than the bodies of other saints. Does the special status of a king's body become amplified when he is made a saint? Does the discussion of saint-kings retain any traces of sacral kingship, or has it disappeared by this later period? Are their bodies treated differently in their worship or burial? This project also leaves itself open to more work in literary theory, especially in the fields of disability studies and medical humanities.

The special status of the king's body in medieval British and Norse culture and literature is merely one aspect of the complicated figure of the king. Looking at how this special status affected the treatment of kings from a cross-cultural, comparative perspective can illuminate relationships between traditions and deepen our understanding of one of the complex issues of kingship. I feel that putting Old Irish, Anglo-Saxon, and Old Norse in conversation with each other has been enlightening in the scope of this project as far as looking at similarities on topics

like disability and the expectations of kings' corporeality. Opening up the discussion to other Germanic and Celtic literary traditions would also be interesting in an attempt to ascertain if the similarities extend to cultures that were not in direct contact with one another, such as Wales and Francia. Inquiries in to how this aspect of the king was understood in the early medieval period have the potential to add to our scholarly knowledge of history and the institution of kingship.

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