10 Fictive Osteobiographical Narrative – The Missing Puzzle Pieces

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Introduction

You were always different than others. Born without complete use of half your body, your path through this life was never easy. Your mother once confided in me that, in a moment of weakness after a very difficult labour, she momentarily considered sparing you a lifetime of hardship by abandoning you, to place, and leave you outside, as was once done with some infants like you. Fortunately for you, me, and your sons, your parents kept faith in our Lord, bolstered by the sight of how tenacious for life you were, with strong cries and a healthy appetite.

Researching disability in the past is not an easy undertaking. The modern understanding of the term does not truly conform to how different bodied people might have been treated, and how they might have viewed themselves in the past. How they would have identified themselves might not be the same as with modern people who are physically different. Therefore, it might be prudent to try to cast off the modern preconceptions of what disability is and how it is constructed today in order to maintain a modern scholarly professionalism and objectivity, while also trying to fill the inevitable yet important blank spots. When researching the past through archaeological investigations, one of the largest issue's researchers have to deal with is what is not there, what is missing. In the effort of filling in these blank spots, where information has been lost to time for one reason or another, subjective insertions from the researcher might become inescapable. This chapter approaches the subject of the physically different in the past from a bioarchaeological starting point, or from the skeleton, then branches outwards from it by touching upon several other academic spheres. This purpose of this effort is not to only catalog and describe physically different people of the past, but to gain insight into their social conditions, their embodied experiences, and the contemporary societal views towards the different. The excerpt here above is from the finished story about a man called Grímur and who is the focus of this chapter. To construct such a story a detailed investigation has to be conducted, a research which starts with the bones

of a certain individual. To a bioarchaeologist, human remains can provide a plethora of meaningful information. However, there are questions which can be difficult to address while only studying physical remains. When a skeleton exhibits symptom of osteoarthritis, or fractures, some degree of pain must have been experienced by the person, but which raises questions that are difficult to answer: How much pain? How long did the period of felt pain remain? Did the pathologies observed on the bone affect those around the person somehow? How did others perceive this physically different person? These sorts of questions are important when studying disability but cannot be answered through the bones alone. In the attempt address such questions in an academic manner, a study of more than just the bones are required.

In this chapter I want to describe a little-known method that has begun to receive some attention in recent years, but is, in itself, not new. It started as a method, or model, called the archaeologies of personhood, which derived from feminist studies on the role of gender, and it demonstrated that it was possible to apply archaeological investigation to understand the unobservable. Its application draws from various aspects of archaeological and bioarchaeological investigations to build and comprehensive account of a person's life (Clark and Wilkie 2006, p. 333–364). I believe that this method is an invaluable tool for archaeologists, osteologists, palaeopathologists, and any other researcher wanting to get a deeper understanding of the lived lives of past people. Anthropologist Alexis Boutin took this model one step further by introducing the aspect of storytelling, or a biographical narrative, by constructing what she calls a “fictive osteobiographical narrative” (Boutin 2016, p. 17–28). This relies on the researcher dealing with the inevitable missing evidence and apply a restrained addition of fiction to compensate for what is missing from the archaeological record. The downsides and potential pitfalls of this method of constructing an account for a person's life will be discussed as well. These missing pieces are issues archaeologists have always had to wrestle with. Items and artefacts are often found out of context, their origin or function unknown, they have been altered or, more often, are missing. It is extremely rare to find a site that is preserved in the same state it was in while in use by the people who lived there at the time. Furthermore, the people who inhabited the excavated structures are seldomly found within the context of the structures, but rather in local cemeteries or burial sites, making any direct connections between a person and structure improbable. However, here is where multifaceted investigations help to make the improbable plausible. One such approach, which is the focus of this chapter, is “fictive osteobiographical narrative,” which is a method to describe a physically different person that utilises an analysis of human remains, research of contemporary information, and also adds fictive elements to provide a holistic account of the person's embodied experiences.

Such osteobiographical narratives call for an investigation of a broad number of research areas. This process could be described as assembling

a puzzle where some of the pieces are missing. First, a palaeopathological and osteological analysis on the skeletal remains would be conducted and if possible, chemical analysis for strontium, oxygen, nitrogen, carbon, and lead isotopes, which are often obtained from tooth enamel samples. Such analytical results can provide information, for example, about where people spent their first years in life and what their main sources of food. A DNA analysis could also be informative, providing additional support for pathological and skeletal analysis. Conventional archaeological information gathered from excavating housings, cemeteries, or other sites along with artefacts and surveys of the local environment can provide vital insights into past people's cultures, lives, and behaviours. However, as previously stated, archaeological data can seldom give a complete picture of the past. Contemporary literary sources can be a treasure trove of information to fill in the gaps, even though they often do not mention different bodied people. Even though direct references to the different bodied are scares, it does not necessarily imply that they are not to be found. By shifting the approach of the inquiry and ask different questions, because a complete absence of something that was undeniably present can be telling. These questions can be something like this: Are different bodied people purposely being neglected in the records? Did the writers of these documents just not care enough? Or perhaps, did people not consider "different bodies" to be "different enough" to actually make the effort to write about? Contemporary literary sources are not without their faults, which is outlined in another chapter in this volume (Crocker *et al.*, 2021, See [Chapter 1](#)). With all the above in mind, let us start a journey together, to see how an account can be constructed about a person's life, experiences, feelings, and views. Let's start from the body, work our way out from it, then end our trek through time by looking back.

Bones: the corner pieces of the puzzle

The first pieces we need to assemble our puzzle, as with most puzzles, would be the corner pieces, which in our case would come from examining the person we are studying. The information that can be obtained from skeletal remains is quite impressive. The biological age at death can be estimated from observations of various developmental markers on several skeletal elements. Biological sex can be assessed, and diseases, trauma, congenital conditions, and syndromes can be documented from morphological indicators from bones (Brothwell 1981, p. 59–73, Van Beek 1983, Hillson 2005, 2008, Işcan *et al.* 1984, p. 853–863, Meindl and Lovejoy 1985, p. 57–66, Brooks and Suchey 1990, p. 227–238). This information can give great insights into how a person's life could have been, how long a person lived and what sort of activities they might have performed, by assessing fractures and muscle attachments or signs of human diversity perceivable on the bones. An idea of a person's livelihood or occupation can be formed by examining certain impairments or physical differences

which produce observable traces, or occupational markers, on skeletal elements through repetitive physical activity (Kennedy 1989, p. 129–160, Weiss 2004, p. 232–238, Katzenberg and Saunders 2008, Villotte *et al.* 2010, p. 224–234). Dominant handedness can also be asserted (Steele 2000). Teeth and some bones can tell us if a person endured malnutrition during their development (Hillson 1996, Temple *et al.* 2012 p. 1640). Using more invasive investigative methods can even be more informative. A DNA analysis can provide evidence for pathological diagnosis and hereditary connections (Ricaud *et al.* 2004, p. 116–121, Lewis 2007, p. 35, Ebenesersdóttir *et al.* 2018, p. 1028–1032). Isotopic analysis can also be very informative. They can give estimates on where a person grew up and what their diet was mainly composed of (Elias *et al.* 1982, p. 2561–2579, Blum *et al.* 2000, p. 99, Budd *et al.* 2001, p. 311–322, Montgomery 2010, p. 326, Voerkelius *et al.* 2010, p. 938). The analysis of the skeletal remains of our individual, Grímur, exhibited signs of a prolonged paralysis in the entire left side of his body, or hemiplegia, with no evidence of trauma. The differential diagnosis of his remains indicate that he had either congenital or acquired Cerebral Palsy, or CP. Since there is no direct causal event responsible for the CP, such as severe head trauma, it is possible to provide a hypothesis within the narrative of the fictive story, seen at the beginning of this chapter, for the presence of the hemiplegia most likely resulting from being born with CP.

To start out the procedure of building a fictive osteobiography, the skeletal remains of an individual must be present. Grímur's remains were excavated at a Christian cemetery named Skeljastaðir, which is situated in the Þjórsárdalur valley in the southern inlands of Iceland. The volcano Hekla erupted in 1104, blanketing the valley with volcanic ash. The exhumation of Grímur showed that the ash layer of 1104 was deposited after his burial, giving us a time frame for his burial from between ca. 1000 and 1104. Osteo- and pathological analysis indicated that this was a robust male of 45+ years. There was moderate to severe osteoarthritis throughout the skeleton, with no signs of trauma or infectious diseases. The left humerus, femur and tibia were both shorter and thinner than their right counterparts, indicating a form of paralysis or hemiplegia which would have been present for a considerable amount of time. Interestingly, osteoarthritis was observed in the affected left foot, which could indicate that the foot was used to some extent. All this information is garnered from the skeleton, but there are other means of investigation that help to understand the individual and their contemporary surroundings, methods that can uncover what is missing, so that the assembly of the puzzle can begin.

Archaeological investigations: artefacts and environment – structural pieces

The second piece we need to understand is how a person lived and moved through the local space, and to do so we would preferably want to investigate contemporary houses and living conditions. Since Grímur's remains were

excavated at a cemetery, we cannot connect him directly to any farmstead excavated in the Þjórsárdalur valley. By studying the excavation reports, drawings, and layout of farmsteads and how the buildings were structured, it can give us information for how a body, such as this man's, could move through the space these buildings. Archaeological investigations can yield an enormous amount of data from multiple different spheres of research. Item or artefacts inform on several aspects, such as availability of materials, movement of valuables, manufacturing techniques, and presumed value of materials. This information would provide the backdrop for our story, the puzzle pieces showing what surrounds the individual gleaned from data gathered from research. An example of such research comes from the excavation at Hofstaðir, northern Iceland. Extensive research was conducted on the site which spans several hundreds of years of occupation (Lucas 2009). One aspect of the research focused on the material remains of the site and their origins (Batey *et al.* 2009, p. 309). The examinations of structures inform on construction techniques and therefore the effort needed to erect buildings for various purposes. Building materials are sometimes gathered from far outside the local area, indicating that much effort was extended to move the material. Occasionally the application of spatial analysis has been applied in an effort to understand how a human body might have moved through a space of a particular archaeological structure (Smith, Marshall and Pearson 2001, p. 265, Chesson 2012, p. 45–73, Gillings, Hacigüzeller and Lock 2020, Rastrick in this volume). Environmental survey and research on roads and travel can give an estimate for how people might have traversed their land and give insight into the contemporary economic and political structure (Nordal 1990, Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 1999, p. 6–8, Thorláksson 2000, McGovern *et al.* 2007, p. 35–38, Einarsson and Aldred 2011, p. 243–255).

Other avenues to gain information about the past can be through zooarchaeology, which can inform on people's diets, social and economic interactions, occupation regarding animals, movement of animals and grazing (Bond 1996, p. 85–86, McCormick 2008, p. 215, Pálsdóttir 2008, p. 111–124, Ogilvie *et al.* 2009, p. 74, O'Connor 2010, p. 1–13, Russell 2012, p. 297–325). Archaeobotany, or the archaeology of ancient flora, utilise remains of plants, seeds and pollen that can give important information for agriculture, domestication, socio-economic structures, and diet (Menziés 2006, p. 87–106, Guðmundsson 2009, p. 322–334, Antolín, Berihuete and López 2016, p. 1–3). Maritime archaeology studies ancient docks and berths, fishing practices and sea travel that can be indicative of trading between far-away places and diet of people (Edvardsson and Egilsson 2011, p. 9–28, Westerdahl 2013, p. 732–762).

Lastly, the natural environment the person might have moved through during life, the local terrain must be considered. Presumably, in a preindustrial society, walking, horse-riding, and boats were the three main modes of transportation. In Iceland, there have been no archaeological finds to support any other modes of transport, such as carts or carriages. Data

gathered from archaeological investigations alone cannot give comprehensive account for a person's experiences and views, nor the contemporary social and cultural constructs which a person interacted and intersected with. To find such pieces of our puzzle, we need to broaden our search area from the bones, grave and archaeology to other academic fields that research the past. Conveying such data in our fictive osteobiographical narrative can be written thusly:

I could not have been more pleased with the area on which we had placed our home, within this flat and accessible ground since it did not hinder you much in your work in or around our farm. Our home, small as it was, was one of your favourite places. The narrow space provided you with support wherever you stood, freeing you from the unwanted pressure to seek help from others.

Literature: legal, religious documents, and sagas – background puzzles

By expanding the scope of the investigation, if possible, it would be prudent to consider contemporary literary works. Law books illustrate the legal framework to which peoples and societies conform, which would provide us with the third type of puzzle pieces. Furthermore, they show how certain behaviours resulted in debilitating punishments and how the legal and social obligations affected the populace and how specific groups would, could or should be treated. These puzzle pieces form the background for our story, where the person is situated within our frame and illustrates the connection between the individual and the society. For Grímur's case, there is no contemporary legal document existing today. We do have, however, documents written shortly after his time which can be retrofitted to Grímur's era. The book named *Grágás* (Gray Goose laws) was in effect in Iceland presumably from the settlement period (ca. 870 AD) to shortly after 1260, when Iceland's governance was taken over by the Norwegian Crown. As a tool for legal justice, it is quite comprehensive and detailed. The subject of disability as we understand it today is never mentioned within the pages of *Grágas*. The largest chapter in *Grágás* is the *Ómagabálkur* (Dependant's charter). This chapter stipulates who are legally responsible for people who cannot provide for themselves, people who for one reason or another are dependent on others for their survival. The definition for who are considered "dependents" is not specified, making it plausible that people who have physical and/or mental impairments would or could be defined as a dependent under this stipulation. This would mean that such people would have a legal right to be provided for to ensure their survival. What is interesting about this stipulation is that if a person who is legally obligated to provide for a dependent but neglects their duties, they can face severe legal fines.

Legal documents and constructs are not the only administrative facet which can impact a person. Religious practices, belief systems and theological decrees towards disability, impairment or different bodied people can be very insightful. When Grímur was alive, around 1000 and 1100 AD, Christianity was the official faith in Iceland. Iceland converted to Christianity in the year 1000, but before that it is believed that most worshipped the deities of the Old Norse pantheon. Examining the Old Norse pantheon from the viewpoint of disability and disability studies is very interesting. The Norse gods have been studied extensively which highlighted the fact that many of these deity's exhibit both physical impairments and cognitive differences to what was likely considered normal (Bragg 2000, p. 128–143, Jónatansdóttir 2013, p. 27–49). Considering the period of Grímur, it is very likely that cultural remnants and knowledge of the former religion was known to Grímur, including awareness of gods with impairments. However, we must acknowledge that during his life, the prevailing religious entities of the Christian faith (God, Jesus, and saints) did not display any significant forms of impairments, at least overtly. Several saints had impairments which did not seem to affect their social or religious status (Lee 2014, p. 45). This is important since it can provide insight into how a person might view themselves and their bodies within their own religious context. We know that during the latter part of the middle ages in Europe there were high standards for the physical aesthetic for Christian priests, so much so that having certain physical impairments could prevent one from becoming a member of the clergy (Swanson 1998, p. 166). Such sentiments within a respected community, such as the clergy, towards different bodied people might have reverberated through the society to some degree.

As stated before, there are often elements missing from the archaeological record due to various factors, such as taphonomy, or natural processes that can cause matter to deteriorate. Iceland is fortunate enough to have a special literary corpus called the *Íslendingasögur* (often simply referred to as the sagas) or special family sagas, written between the 11th and 13th centuries. Using this corpus can be difficult and problematic, with several issues scholars have to be aware of (Crocker *et.al.*, 2021 in this volume). If we look again at Hofstaðir with consideration to roads, travel, and commerce, some interesting questions come to mind. There is evidence of materials, such as specific stones, that are only found many kilometres away, which was somehow brought from their original deposits to Hofstaðir. No archaeological evidence has been found for wagons or carriages in Iceland during the medieval period. However, there are a few literary references to the use of wagons in the sagas. In *Gunnars Saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, it says: “Gunnar var þá mjög sár. Lagði Þorbjörn hann í vagn og óku þeir honum heim” (Gunnar was then gravely wounded. Thorbjorn laid him in a wagon, and they drove him home) (Anon 2007, ch. 4). A wagon is also mentioned in *Vígaglúms Saga* (Anon 1956 ch. 23).

There is also evidence of other forms of assistive devices in the Sagas. In *Brennu-Njáls Saga*, a use of a staff as a walking aid is mentioned when Þórhallur Ásgrímsson suffers a lasting injury to his ankle (Anon 1954, ch. 135). This same chapter also mentions that, since Þórhallur is unable to go a þing by himself to aid in legal matters, he is provided with an escort of twenty men, to ensure that he gets to the þing safely. This sort of references is important for several reasons. Firstly, it implies that people used items to aid their maneuverability when they became impaired. Secondly, items, such as staffs and carriages are extremely hard to find in archaeological contexts. Therefore, such references provide insinuations that such items were in fact used, while modern day researchers have no physical evidence for their existence. Be that as it may, it is still an interesting stipulation regarding impairments. To weave such information into a fictive osteobiographical narrative for Grímur would look like this:

Both our sons were born while you were away. Our firstborn came into this world while you were traveling back from þing. The distance to the þing, shorter for you than most other, still was long and difficult for you, even with your trusted walking staff. The Lögmaður secured men to travel there with you, as well as to take care of the farm while you attended þing, a courtesy befitting your station. Even though you needed these men, you always disliked asking for assistance, no matter the situation, even refusing to utilise the wagons. These men you had stationed at the house were very diligent, maintaining the household while I recovered from childbirth.

The missing puzzle pieces

Even with this plethora of data and references, a full, holistic account can never be constructed with any degree of confidence. Some information is always lost to us. What is found and observed is never everything that was present during the time period being investigated. Buildings are abandoned, leaving only fragments from its usage behind. Bones can be affected, moved, or destroyed via natural processes. Human remains found in one particular cemetery cannot be directly allocated to the local area of that cemetery, since people are often mobile. It is also not possible to observe emotions from skeletal remains. Ideals and beliefs are intangible but important to a person's identity and their own notions about their society and their place within it. This would comprise our fourth and last types of puzzle pieces, and unfortunately, pieces we do not have. Here is where the fictive part comes into the investigation – an estimation or understanding person's embodied habitus as well as the habitual and religious practices that must be achieved to build the foundation for a person's life story. The term "habitus" is used here both in the context of the archaeology's term for a body's physique, while also referring to the concepts of body habitus by Pierre Bourdieu, where the body is regarded as the physical embodiment

of cultural habits and activities (Bourdieu 1986, p. 241–258). The only emotion or feeling that can be inferred from skeletal remains with any degree of certainty would be physical pain, but pain is not the only emotion people experience through life. Happiness, loss, anger, joy, and love are emotions shared throughout humanity and through time but is seldomly address in archaeological context. The missing pieces represent what has been lost, not available, and the intangible. These pieces, while our individual was alive, existed but are inaccessible to us today. With the certainty that this information once existed, we can connect together what we know, what we have, to see what these missing pieces could have looked like. With all of the possible data that can be gathered from the sources mentioned here above, and with conscious subjectivity put in the mix, we can begin to construct our fictive osteobiographical narrative.

Ethical considerations – Why do the puzzle?

Before delving into the murky waters of educated and subjective speculations, I want to step back for a moment. It is prudent to be aware of the ethical consideration whilst discussing a person. The first point I want to mention is naming the skeleton. Within the context of archaeological archiving, the individual discussed in this chapter, Grímur, is labelled as BSK-A-040, with the BSK indicating the excavation site and 040 is assigned by the excavators, often by the order in which the individuals were excavated, this person being the 40th during that project. This method is widely practiced and accepted, and for most intents and purposes valid. However, since this project is focused on gaining understanding on a personal level, I found it appropriate to not use this serial number when discussing matters revolving around the remains. Therefore, within the confines of this project, I decided to give the remains a different label, or Grímur. This is an old male name which several men documented in the *Landnámubók* (the book of settlers) held. The name has also a specific meaning, which will be discussed later in this chapter. The ethical considerations are perhaps apparent. Using an incorrect name, given to him without consent and perhaps assigning a personality or emotions that are wrong or not his own. I would argue that consistently invoking the serial number when referring to a person has its own ethical considerations and does, to a degree, dehumanise human remains.

Other ethical issues which should be addressed are the matter of staring and displaying. By this I am referring to the researcher looking, or observing a person in, arguably, its most vulnerable state or naked to the bone. A typical trend within bioarchaeology is to take pictures of the whole available skeleton when it has been articulated, in other words laid out on a table. This sort of documentation and presentation is an accepted practice within the sphere of bioarchaeology. I would, however, want to invite researchers to reconsider this approach. Within disability studies there is an interesting discussion on the topic of staring, where people

with different types of bodies experience being stared at by others, with the accompanying feeling of being different, strange, unwelcome, or feared. This relates to people being objectified and being put on display, which has been discussed in the context of medical photographs for instance (Garland-Thomson 2006, p. 178, Renwick *et al.* 2016, p. 283–291). In line with my approach to human remains as being people, even though I know and understand that they are dead, I approach them as being alive, and treat them with the same respect I would treat a living person. Therefore, I only present pictures of specific skeletal elements and from a specific, nonrevealing angles that underline a specific point I want to focus on that aids to my illustration of the account I am presenting (see [Figure 10.1](#)).

But why do all this? Why gather all this information and just “fill in the blanks”? This is a valid consideration, for who are we to assert authority about a person who cannot rebut or disagree? Researchers of the past have always done this to a certain degree, make interpretations based on careful research. I would contend that the method described in this chapter is a valid step in the process and progress of scientific inquiry, based in an academic field which straddles empirical and nonempirical investigations, and where some of the variables are unavailable.

Grímur: assembling the puzzle

The puzzle is now ready to be assembled. We have an adult/middle aged man with hemiplegia who most likely was a local to the Þjórsárdalur valley. He died before the eruption of mount Hekla and was buried in a Christian cemetery. This is valuable information since its settlement, Iceland had no centrally established religion and was largely pagan. This changed in 1000 AD when it peacefully accepted the Christian faith (with some exemptions to begin with, such as consumption of horse meat was still allowed as well as child abandonment). This means that after 1000 AD Christian burial practices began to take over from the prior practice of mound and boat burials. This gives us a relative time period for when this man was alive, between 1000 and 1104. The second pieces would be associated artefacts. No grave goods were recovered from Grímur's grave, and no artefact have been found in Iceland, in an archaeological context, that can be attributed or connected with disability. References to such items can be found in literary sources, such as staffs and wagons.

Excavated, contemporary structures, ideally located locally to where the remains were found, can provide insightful information. Knowing the type of different body being studied, and having a layout of a structure, as well as the local terrain that body might have had to move through can help us understand the obstacles that person faced within a home, and how those obstacles might have been overcome. The last tangible puzzle pieces are

Figure 10.1 Grímur's tibiae. Right tibia is much smaller, shorter, and thinner than its counterpart. The picture only shows what is necessary to convey relevant information without putting the whole person on display. The picture is taken by this author with the permission of the National Museum of Iceland.

literary sources. These must be as contemporary as possible, so they convey relevance. Legal documents provide insight into how society might have viewed different bodied people. Sources, such as the sagas provide cultural context, and religious texts can be informative for how a governing institution viewed different bodied people. All of these literary sources can also infer to us how a different bodied person might have viewed itself within their contemporary society. Seldomly having a high social status as a group, different bodied people are often hard to find in medieval literary contexts, as in the case of Grágás and the *Íslendingasögur*. The absence, or lack of direct references to the different bodied in the sagas is at first glance a bit striking. However, if one looks deeper into these texts, whilst simultaneously disregarding the modern-day conceptions of disability or impairment and seeks to understand the contemporary perceptions towards the different bodied, these literary works can provide a plethora of valuable and relevant information. Their apparent “silence” can speak volumes.

Grímur’s story: how the pieces fit together

Before showing you an excerpt from the fictive osteobiographical narrative of Grímur, I would like to reiterate that this text is constructed by amassing data from multiple different sources. All names for people, and all people mentioned except for Grímur are fictive, and the story is being told through Grímur’s fictive wife. In an effort to humanise the skeletal remains of individual ÞSK-A-040, I assigned them a different label, a human name. That name was Grímur. It has historical roots in Iceland, with several men in the Book of Settlers (*Landnámabók*) named Grímur. The name is also the plural of the word “gríma,” or mask. I found the name very fitting, both for its historical presence, and that everyone wears metaphorical masks in everyday life, or roles. We are simultaneously parents, siblings, spouses, workers, leaders and so on. We also have a tendency to mask our emotions from others, even those that are close to us.

The narrative is set in Þjórsárdalur valley, which is where Grímur’s remains were found. All mentions of experiencing pain are derived from the estimation of pain which can be attributed from having hemiplegia. This text should not be taken as the truth, but rather as a possible truth, the most plausible version of how the person, known within this project as Grímur, might had experienced life. Within the text are specific references which are explained below, which give the text more depth.

My father brought our family to Kári’s farmstead on his way to Þing¹. My mother and my siblings stayed at your home while the grown men attended Þing. I remember how shy you were, how apprehensive you were of my reaction to your faltered speech and crippled body, but as the days passed your nervousness subsided more and more.² Once you told me, long after, that it was my smile which put ease into your heart.

Proud, stubborn fool. You toiled and stressed your body everyday beyond its limits. You knew your sons were old enough to help cutting the peat,³ yet you insisted on doing the labour alone. Exerting your body to the brink of exhaustion to pay for a sin, for that is why the Lord bestowed your coil with such hardship, you said. I know that stiffness in the back often comes with age⁴ but you even did not allow yourself to acknowledge that fact. Sitting by the long fire⁵ with the scarlet flames highlighting the creases of that hardened face, I see that you are not only in pain, but physically drained, and mentally depleted. You are so versed and insistent in hiding it from the world around you, for reasons I have never fathomed. How I wish that you could take off this mask⁶ and be yourself, be it only around your wife, for a wife always knows, always sees, always cares.

Conclusion – a visible image from a fractured puzzle

Probably the most important notion one must keep in mind while constructing a fictive osteobiographical narrative is to be aware of one's preconceived ideas for what constitutes as disability. The term disability is, in a sense, fluid. It changes through time, and its definition is often different between geographical areas. This is particularly true today, with several schools of thought regarding what constitutes or precipitates disability. This could also hold true for past societies, but their notions towards disability could very well differ from modern views, and this should always be considered.

Humans have evolved in such a way that our brains strive to create and seek out patterns in our surroundings. Therefore, when looking at a puzzle with missing pieces, our brain tries to fill in the voids to create the rest of the image of the puzzle. The more pieces we have access to, the easier that void-filling process is. As Charlotte Roberts (2000) put so eloquently "The attitudes to disease and disability at any particular time period must also be considered, and a multidisciplinary and holistic approach taken, because without one form of evidence, a vital part of the jigsaw may be missing" (p. 57). This method, fictive osteobiographical narrative, is an academic attempt to fill in the puzzle, to recreate those missing pieces. It is not the intent of this project to put the statements made here on a pedestal as they are the only true understanding of each person investigated. They are made with the intention to present the most probable story for an individual with these types of different bodies within the contemporary community, whilst also creating a medium to address seldomly discussed issues within archaeology, such as the effects of pain. When endeavouring to understand a person, someone who is far removed from our own time period, one must aspire, as with any scientific and academic enterprise, to be as objective as possible. Objectivity must be the aim of every investigation, and when studying a person, alive or not, ethical considerations must be observed.

However, the researcher must also recognise that subjectivity is often inescapable, or even necessary since interpretation is often based on the personal knowledge and experience of the researcher.

Fictive osteobiographical narrative draws together empirical scientific evidence, from osteo- and pathological analysis, archaeological excavations and physical science, and literary references from various sources, and provides a venue for a researcher to address and discuss elements which are, for one reason or another, not available for archaeological observation. Key elements of every research is imagination, without it we would not be able to connect the dots the data brings. Here imagination is given an even bigger role as it becomes a vital tool to move beyond pure analysis to an intricate and narrative interpretation of difference source materials. This method aims to give an as holistic account of a person, or a specific society and their views towards each other. Furthermore, it gives the researcher the opportunity to discuss and debate how those people experienced their own body, their environment and society. Connecting the assembled pieces together enables us to give an estimation for what is missing, whilst also facilitates the possibility for the researcher to acknowledge and examine the intangible and personal. The fictive osteobiographical narrative, albeit a partly fictional, is grounded in the actual. Moreover, it can also touch on how the contemporary society, legal structure and institutions might have interacted and intersected with people with bodies and/or minds which did not conform to the culturally accepted norms. Even though this method adds a fictional element to the study of a person, it is based and structured on empirical and observable evidence. One does not exclude the other, for they are dependent on each other as the evidence themselves do not tell the full story, and a fictional narrative without supporting evidence renders the whole endeavour moot. At the very least, it can initiate a discussion on disability where researchers from various academic fields can participate, for with discussion, debate and understanding, can true progress be made. For the concluding remarks, I would like to give voice to Grímur's wife one last time, for all the effort made here above, was for them:

“When old age had claimed you, I could see through the visor of your expression, as you lay motionless in your cot, that you were at long last serene and without pain. As your story ends, when you are laid to rest on the holy grounds where we were wed, our story will continue.”

Notes

1. A place for meeting to settle legal and other disputes. Also served as a place for local governance. The main þing was called the Alþing, which was established in 930 AD, was located at Þingvellir. Gatherings there were held regularly and was often concerned with matters affecting the entire country.

The decision to convert the Icelandic population to Christianity was made there in the year 1000 AD. Þingvellir is to the west of Þjórsárdalur, roughly 90 km away.

2. People with hemiplegia and CP can often have impaired speech, varying in severity.
3. These areas of turf are rich in decayed organic matter was cut long ribbons and used as fuel, for burning or heating
4. Often referred to as bone spurs, osteophytes commonly increase in frequency with the advancement of age. These bone formations can cause or, in conjunction with other conditions, contribute to impaired movement, discomfort or pain.
5. An open fire pit, most often located in the middle of the main housing compartment, was the main source of indoor heating during early medieval Iceland. They have even been suggested to have been a form of status symbol. Some have been measured to have been up to 5.8 meters long.
6. This is a common Icelandic name in the modern era. The oldest mention of it in Iceland is found in Íslendingabók, in reference to a man named Grímur who settled at Grímsnes. The word grímur has a specific meaning to it. It is the plural of the word gríma, meaning mask. Grímur would therefore translate as masks.

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