THE CHALLENGES OF QUANTIFYING YOUTH AND AGE IN THE MEDIEVAL NORTH

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What, if anything, did it mean to be young and old in the medieval north? Age is ‘an organising principle that we all of us live with all of the time’,¹ but to define youth and age today, let alone in society of a thousand years ago, is difficult indeed. Although the study of the medieval life cycle has advanced in recent years, the focus has been on aspects of youth and age in high and late medieval societies, mostly within southern Europe.² With some notable exceptions, little dedicated work has been accomplished on the concepts of youth and age in the medieval north,³ here defined as encompassing the geographic northern

² For medieval Europe in general, see J.A. Burrow, The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought (Oxford, 1986); Michael E. Goodich, From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350 (Lanham, MD, 1989); Shulamith Shahar, Childhood in the Middle Ages (London, 1990); Ageing and the Aged in Medieval Europe, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990); Joel T. Rosenthal, Old Age in Late Medieval England (Philadelphia, 1996); Shulamith Shahar, Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain’, trans. by Yael Lotan (London, 1997); Nicholas Orme, Medieval Children (Yale, 2001); Colin Heywood, A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West From Medieval to Modern Times (Cambridge, 2001); Youth in the Middle Ages, ed. by P.J.P. Goldberg and Felicity Riddy (York, 2004); P.J.P. Goldberg, ‘Life and Death: the Ages of Man’, in A Social History of England 1200–1500, ed. by Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 413–34, 501–02. Concerning this southern high and late medieval hegemony, Edward James suggests with tongue half in cheek that Shulamith Shahar’s Childhood in the Middle Ages should more honestly be retitled, as so many books of this kind should, Childhood in the Last Third of the Middle Ages, between 1150 and 1500, Mostly in France’: Edward James, ‘Childhood and Youth in the Early Middle Ages’, in Youth in the Middle Ages, pp. 11–23 (p. 14).
region of Europe and the North Atlantic within the temporal and cultural frames of Anglo-Saxon England and Viking-Age Britain, Iron-Age and medieval Scandinavia, and Iceland from the landnám to c. 1400. The medieval north is best distinguished from the remainder of medieval Europe by the gradual transition from a preliterate, Germanic culture to a literate, Christian culture, and the visible admixture of these two cultural traditions. The expansion of settlement and trade networks, and increased cultural contact with subsequent negotiation of ethnic identities, also typify the north. Much population movement occurred in the early medieval period and it should therefore be inferred that any given community was composed of individuals and groups of different ethnic origin or identity with varying social attitudes about the life cycle. The societies of the medieval north shared customs, poetry and arts which emerged from a pre-Christian Germanic worldview, later influenced by classical and Christian ideologies, but Fredrik Svanberg counters any idea of a pan-Scandinavian culture spanning the entirety of the Viking Age as simplistic and misleading. He states ‘There was no homogenous and coherent “culture”, conforming to a unilinear pattern of evolutionary change’. Although the culture of ninth-century England cannot be viewed in the same manner as that of Iceland in the high medieval period, certain commonalities exist to allow for a comparative volume of regionally and temporally specific studies. Definitions and expressions of youth and age in the north do substantially differ from those in the remainder of medieval Europe, and thus a volume dedicated solely to the north is timely and appropriate.

In the north, whether one is defined as young or old depends quite a lot on individual circumstance and not chronological age as is the