The Old Norse language does not have a term for adolescence as such; thus we may wonder whether we can discuss the phenomenon at all if the culture itself does not identify it. However, even if there is no term for it in Old Norse, adolescence is rooted in the biological universal of puberty; cross-cultural psychological evidence suggests that pre-industrial societies usually identify a transitional stage between childhood and the adult world for their young people. ‘Adolescence as a social stage with its own activities and behaviors, expectations and rewards, is well recorded in the history and literature of earlier times’, Schlegel and Barry note. Adolescence, in their broad anthropological definition, is a time when learning is occurring and social roles are being restructured; although the young man remains subordinate to community elders, he is preparing for adulthood and manifestly no longer a child. Many traditional societies mark this transition with rites of passage, formal public events which may involve three or four separate stages, outlined below. Explicit rites of passage are not described in Old Norse sources, although Mary Danielli has argued that initiation rites for the young
Icelander might occur at the ancestral home in Norway, involving ritual encounters with bears and berserks. The sagas of Icelanders do not tend to observe that a boy has become a man. Nevertheless Turner’s analysis of such rites as consisting in separation, a liminal stage, and reincorporation is suggestive both for saga literature and also for the heroic paradigms upon which it may draw. The first independent journey which the saga hero makes, sometimes only as far as the Alþingi, but most frequently abroad, to visit Norway or to take part in a raiding trip, might well be regarded as incorporating rite-of-passage elements, marking the young man’s readiness to negotiate the transition into the world of adult political and economic activity.

In contemporary medieval literature from elsewhere in Europe, in scientific treatises and works derived from classical learning, a distinct stage of the iuvenis or young man is identified. Late medieval historical records often identify young men as a problematic stratum, especially in urban society. Although medieval masculinities have become a subject of scholarly interest, there has been relatively little discussion of the transition in Old Norse until very recently. Anna Hansen’s

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6 Mary Danielli, ‘Initiation Ceremonial from Norse Literature’, *Folklore*, 56 (1945), 229–45.
7 For legal provisions regarding the transition see Anna Hansen, ‘Representations of Children in Early Icelandic Society’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sydney, 2006), pp. 60–68 and Percivall, this volume. References to ‘sagas’ in this article are to the sagas of Icelanders; where discussion is of fornaldarsögur they are designated as such. Nic Percivall, this volume, examines the evidence for the transition from boy to man in contemporary sagas (samtíðarsögur). See also Chris Callow, ‘Transitions to Adulthood in Early Icelandic Society’ in *Children, Childhood and Society* ed. by Sally Crawford and Gillian Shepherd, IAA Interdisciplinary Series: Studies in Archaeology, History, Literature and Art (Oxford, 2007), pp. 45–55, on the significance of the ages twelve and fifteen in the Íslendingasögur.
8 Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘From Iceland to Norway: Essential Rites of Passage for an Early Icelandic Skald’, *Alvíssmál*, 9 (1999), 55–72 acknowledges the function of the journey in her title, though her argument is more concerned with cultural relations between Iceland and Norway.