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23 FEUD

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Sagas are driven by conflicts between people concerning issues such as wealth, family, and prestige. This theme is particularly prominent in the *Íslendingasögur* (sagas of Icelanders). The similarity in style and plot of many of the better known examples of the genre suggest that the conflicts narrated in the text resemble real conflicts experienced by the Icelandic population in the Middle Ages. These are in many cases conflicts of a very mundane type: people clashing over things such as hay (*Hænsa-Dóris saga*), the meat of a stranded whale (*Hávarðar saga Ísfrídings*), or the rights to graze livestock in a certain field (as in the late part of *Egils saga*). Those conflicts have often been described as *feuds* or *blood feuds* and they have been an important topic of discussion in the last four decades of scholarship on medieval Icelandic society and literature. The aim of this chapter is to provide a succinct overview of the core perspectives on feud in both historical and literary research. However, it seems necessary to start from a broader perspective, as scholarship on feud did not originate in historiography or literary criticism, but in ethnography.

Anthropological and Historiographical Background

The study of feuds has a well-established tradition in anthropological research, which precedes studies of Norse feud by roughly half a century.¹ Anthropologists understand feud as a social and political institution, rather than a strictly legal matter, given that many feuding societies studied by ethnographers lack any specific sphere of law. For example, in his foundational book *The Nuer* (referring to an ethnic group located in the Nile River valley) E. E. Evans-Pritchard wrote that 'the Nuer have no government . . . likewise, they lack law'.² This distinction remains important to understand how studies of Icelandic feud have been conducted, as such studies are in practice largely independent from older writings on medieval Scandinavian legal systems conducted by German-speaking scholars during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Leopold Pospíšil's classic *Anthropology of Law* defines feud as: 'a series (at least three instances) of acts of violence, usually involving killings, committed by members of two groups related to each other by superimposed political-structural features (often involving the existence of an overall political authority) and acting on the basis of group solidarity (a common duty to avenge and a common liability)'.³ While this is a useful definition, each scholar tends to adjust his or her definition based on both personal perspective and the specific context analysed. Despite this

Pospíšil's definition helps to distinguish feud from other uses of violence such as war, self-redress, legal process, and criminal actions, either by groups or individuals. There is generally little disagreement between scholars about the difference between these institutions.

The Nuer became the basis of a milestone article by Max Gluckman, which established in a more general way the conditions for a society to use feud as a convenient settlement of disputes.⁴ While Evans-Pritchard sought to reveal the principles of social structure in a tribal society without noticeable social differentiation and organized through agnatic kinship,⁵ Gluckman subtly modified the ideas of Evans-Pritchard, by stating clearly that 'the Nuer have an established code of law'.⁶ Instead, he argued that what they lack are legal procedures and officials. Gluckman emphasized the role of arbitrators: local men, called the 'leopard-skin chiefs', who, compelled by ties of vicinity or kinship with the feuding sides, try to mediate and help to settle disputes. These men act to moderate the influence of agnatic kinship that would promote vengeance, and are likely to appear among people who have ties with both feuding groups. The author argues, in typical functionalist fashion, that conflicts that are contained and channelled through customary institutions do in fact create (rather than disrupt) social cohesion. However, it should be remarked that here 'feud' means mostly *potential* feud, rather than *actual* feud. It is the possibility of feud that tends to discourage its realization by pressing towards settlement before violence escalates.

Gluckman's article is also of direct interest to Old Norse-Icelandic studies because he links feud to the Middle Ages. He aims to show how locality and intermarriage in Anglo-Saxon society must have discouraged feuding between cognatic kin groups, comparing them to the Kalingas of the Philippines.⁷ This analogy is not fully explained, but it shows a principle common in the studies of Icelandic feud: modern societies can be compared to medieval societies when they share some structural similarities.

Medievalists began to study feud following the anthropological example in the 1960s. The early medieval *faida* and related practices were among the earliest cases under study through the influential works of John Wallace-Hadrill and Robert Rees Davies.⁸ These Oxonian medievalists were influenced by the studies of Evans-Pritchard, and broadly speaking, by British social anthropology, which in the same decade began to focus on conflict, as most clearly illustrated by the 'Manchester school'. It is not surprising that one of the earliest studies of the Icelandic sagas written from an anthropological perspective was produced by Victor Turner, one of the major Mancunian anthropologists.⁹ However, by the time studies on Icelandic feud became common (during the 1980s), anthropology was undergoing deep changes. The declining popularity of determinist, structural views renewed the impulse of approaches that highlighted individual choice and that saw the outcome of social relationships as less predictable. These new trends coexisted with structural analysis in the studies on Icelandic feuds.

Feud in Medieval Iceland: Classic Studies

The Structure and Meaning of Feud

Among the earliest introductory texts about Icelandic feud is a study written by Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller.¹⁰ It is part of a long analytical overview of the main issues in medieval Icelandic society that precedes two translated sagas.¹¹ Both authors provide thoughtful, theoretically inspired readings of sagas, and their different backgrounds (as a literary scholar and a legal historian, respectively) are in this case complementary.

Their view is that feuds are central to saga literature. They acknowledge that this centrality is in part due to the fact that feuds are good tropes for storytelling, but they claim that this

centrality also reflects actual reality, due to inferences derived from a comparison with ethnographic work. They state that 'among the class of chieftains and big farmers the blood feud was the foundation of Icelandic dispute processing and social control'.¹² They consider this to work at two distinct levels: the narrow level of legality (as feud was legally sanctioned) and the broader level of social structure (as feud was structurally operative). They build on the ideas of the early twentieth-century Swiss scholar Andreas Heusler¹³ and distinguish between three aspects of feud: blood revenge, lawsuits, and arbitration.

For Andersson and Miller, feuds can move between all those phases, reach settlement, and rekindle once again – feud is a process. They construct a typology of the diverse means of dispute resolution, listing adjudication, arbitration, mediation, negotiation, coercion, avoidance (ignoring the other group), and 'lumping it' (ignoring the issue). According to them, what allowed each case to be solved using certain modes was a 'direct function of the power differences between the principal disputants and the absolute status of the claimants'.¹⁴ Furthermore, they remark that engaging in feud was not an option for the poor and the weak, because it was costly. Instead, the disputes of the weak became the matter of their superiors; it is thus clear that feud served as a form of social control.¹⁵

Their explanation is generally functionalist: feud manages conflicts, and so it creates (misbalanced) equilibrium; the channels of resolution used are not dependent on individual will, but instead on positions within the structure. Homeostasis here takes the shape of what the authors label 'the economy of honour'. Honour, a constant (or slowly diminishing) stock was always at stake 'in gift-exchange, in feud and law, in wit and wealth, in fighting skill and weaponry, in clothing and carriage, in the quality of one's kin and spouse and even, or maybe especially, in seating arrangements'.¹⁶ Logically, if honour is seen as a stable stock, all honour gained has to be conceived as being gained from someone else's honour. The main concern is how the system stabilizes itself and remains functioning. However, stability is grounded in rational processes. Saga characters act logically, knowing their position in the system they react accordingly. Feuds happen under certain conditions where the agents have the means to and the expectation of winning by entering the feud.

These ideas, succinctly exposed in *Law and Literature*, are given a much more detailed treatment in Miller's *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*.¹⁷ This book has been hugely influential, and almost all the studies discussed here refer to it regularly. Feud is a major concern in this very ambitious book on dispute resolution, and it is difficult to give a balanced overview of it in a few paragraphs. Miller remarks that feud is a process that includes (but exceeds) blood revenge. He argues that feud takes the vocabulary of gift-giving and inverts it, because it also follows 'a model of balance and reciprocity', in which the debts are made of blood.¹⁸ Miller argues that such a model provides a vocabulary for feud. However, it does not lead to predictable outcomes, because it cannot explain (to the participants) the identity or the timing of the next target for retaliation.¹⁹ Miller also argues that feud needs to be fought between equals. Indeed, classical studies about feuding were conducted in egalitarian societies, or inside the same social stratum in non-egalitarian societies. The author infers from this that the main issue of feud was honour, because it would have been worthless to feud with social inferiors. Miller shifts the centre of attention from the *structure* of feud to the *meaning* of feud: he is concerned with the motivation of the feuding individuals, who are playing a game of honour.

Here one can notice the influence of formalist anthropology in its more refined, less radical form, as with Pierre Bourdieu and Fredrik Barth. Miller's view appears grounded on an economic analogy: honour-seeking individuals struggle in feud with each other to obtain something scarce. He even asserts that 'honour was a precious commodity in very short supply'.²⁰ He thus assumes that honour existed in a given amount, and that the only way to obtain it was to take

it from someone else, in a zero-sum game. Such a picture does not seem so much like inverted gift-giving, but instead follows market-like logic: individuals with wants, a limited supply of a commodity, and competition.

Miller's view puzzled at least one reviewer,²¹ because it is impossible to prove that honour was a commodity in limited supply, or that it is a commodity in any sense. It is possible that the shift to an agent-based explanation created a theoretical need for an individual motivation that was not relevant in structural, determinist views. In other words, for Miller, a participant in feud does not act because the system compels him in a certain direction, but he instead tries consciously to find his place inside the boundaries of the system, presumably looking for his own benefit: honour provides a rational cause and goal for action. Only if honour is imagined as scarce can it be thought to be the real cause of struggle, as otherwise the feuding parties could have simply *produced* honour. However, Miller's focus on individual motivation allows for an interesting discussion of sources that give 'explicit statements of motive and reason' for feuding,²² which were easily overlooked in structural views derived from Gluckman's model.²³

Another major book on feud, Jesse L. Byock's *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982), was published a few years before Andersson's and Miller's books. The book shows noticeable influences from debates on the form of composition of sagas among literary scholars. Byock argues that the formal structure of the sagas is based on an institution rooted in the social life of medieval Icelanders: the feud. Byock coined the term 'feudemes', defined as the active building blocks of saga narrative, an analogy to the role that phonemes have in phonology and mythemes in mythology studies as basic units. Byock divides feudemes into three types: conflict, advocacy, and resolution feudemes. They were combined in different manners, and entwined with information about travel and subjects of other types (such as genealogies or descriptions of landholdings) to create narrative clusters, which are subsequently linked in chains of feuds, and which the author sees as forming the backbone organizing the sagas.²⁴

The book provides an extensive list of examples of stories possibly built through such a procedure, taken from the *Íslendingasögur*, the *Sturlunga* compilation (*Saga of the Sturlungar*), and *Landnámabók* (*The Book of Settlements*). Byock's analysis does not try to explain in detail how feuds worked and what their precise characteristics in social reality were, rather he focuses on how saga composers took advantage of feud as a narrative principle. References to ethnography are minimal, even if the text shows a preoccupation with linking social and literary life that is common in anthropologically inspired scholarship.

While Byock does not provide a systematic explanation of the causes for feuding, it is interesting to remark that in his view, land appears to be one of the main sources of conflict, and he dedicates a whole chapter to the issue.²⁵ His argument is that good land was scarce in Iceland, and so competition for its control was fierce. This triggered conflicts which tended to escalate into feuds. Byock's argument foreshadows some of the views noticeable in his later books, which show influence from the cultural materialism school of anthropology.²⁶ Honour and kinship, on the other hand, play a minor role in his explanation.

Byock has produced numerous texts about Icelandic feuds after his *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*.²⁷ One of them, 'Feuding in Viking Age Iceland's Great Village', synthesizes his general perspective.²⁸ Byock argues that medieval Iceland was a 'great village society', because there was a distinctive cultural unity, economic cooperation was necessary for the survival of the farms, warrior mentality was limited, and power was (during the early period here discussed) based on personal ties rather than territory. Therefore, the whole island functioned like a village, and Byock argues that this shaped the way feud functioned. Referring to a distinction made by Emrys Peters, he distinguishes between inter-tribal feuds and intra-village vendetta killings. He exemplifies the first case with reference to Montenegrin societies, locked in perpetual (blood)

feuds by opposing tribes which controlled specific territories, and intra-tribal feuds between opposing clans.

Byock argues that due to the structural differences between Montenegro and Iceland, the second could not tolerate long-standing blood feuds. Group solidarity was too weak, and territorial safety was non-existent. As in a village, members of any faction lived side by side. In other words, the us-versus-them logic of territorial groups was non-existent. This also had an impact on the way leadership was enacted. For Byock, Icelandic chieftains specialized in power-brokering and advocacy, and their power depended on a form of reciprocity between followers, comparable to *big men* and modern local politicians. Their long-term interest will not be constant feud, but settlement by compensation, and their main game will be to earn prestige and wealth by representing and helping followers in disputes, their authority more nominal than real, like the leopard-skin chiefs among the Nuer.

The similarities between Byock's argument and the classical study by Evans-Pritchard are not surprising if one considers their general theoretical frameworks. Byock explains, in a structural and functional fashion, how the medieval Icelandic social system is orderly, and how all participants would benefit from stability rather than violence, as this was a threat to both personal and social integration.²⁹ Byock emphasizes cultural traits, which are ultimately defined psychologically and linguistically. The reader can also see traces of a materialist approach in Byock's argument, as not only cultural 'mental' factors, but also that the more concrete realities of economic cooperation in livestock managing are forces which shape the system of dispute resolution.³⁰

Finally, Byock argues that sagas are the result of the 'storytelling of crisis',³¹ which shows dramatic examples of people unwilling to compromise, even if in reality this would not have been tolerated (as it would put the social order at risk). His picture of medieval Iceland is one of an orderly, stateless society with strong incentives for peace. Competing chieftains struggled for wealth and prestige by political means, but violence was relatively rare. The contrast with Miller's perspective is striking. It can be explained, at least in part, by different theoretical influences, which have been referred to, but also by different interests. Byock aims to explain *how the system works*, while Miller aims to explain *how individuals acted within the system*. The tension between structural and agent-based approaches that dominated social science in the post-structuralist years probably underlies the contrasting approaches between these scholars.

In a recent article, Helgi Þorláksson seeks to clarify the diverse and ambiguous meanings of feud and feuding when applied to medieval Europe.³² He reviews a large number of texts, written by both medievalists and anthropologists, making his text an excellent guide for research on the topic. The Icelandic historian criticizes Miller's approach because he finds that the American author has taken inspiration from ethnographical studies of feud based on societies with unilinear kinship. Helgi Þorláksson notices that this leads Miller to assumptions that do not apply in a society with a bilinear kinship system, such as Iceland. He finds that Icelandic blood feuds do not last for a long time like those of unilinear societies and that they do not necessarily involve groups but can also be carried on by individuals. Moreover, kin group solidarity tends to be exaggerated by Miller, as it is typically stronger in unilinear kinship systems than in bilateral ones.

For Helgi Þorláksson, a feud does not necessarily involve the spilling of blood or manslaughter (this typifies what he calls a blood feud), but instead the mutual reciprocation of violence between two parties (either individuals or groups), which take turns at inflicting violence on each other or on each other's property. An alternated sequence of at least three acts of violence must have taken place before a state of feud may be said to have developed. The violence escalates as time passes.³³

This definition is structural and institutional, and has the advantage of not requiring much speculation about the motivation of the participants. Helgi Þorláksson seems to take Gluckman's model as an inspiration, but the core of his analysis for Iceland is derived from primary sources rather than from the direct application of any pre-made theory. He also distinguishes between two quite different processes called feud: proper feud and customary vengeance. He notices that the early medieval *faida* is often closer to the second rather than the first. True feuds serve to claim rights, while *faida* is much more specific and often coexists with a ruler or law code. True feuds, on the other hand, tend to exist outside the law, or in parallel to it (these distinctions resemble those made by Pospíšil). Moreover, he notices that both categories are also mixed in the word *vendetta*, which can refer to either feuds or customary vengeance.

Sverre Bagge has also written about feud in his book about *Heimskringla*, an in-depth analysis of a Norse literary source in terms of social history.³⁴ For Bagge, feud is one of the constitutive elements of Snorri Sturluson's representation of conflicts. Following the distinctions made by Pospíšil, he lists three modes of solving conflict in medieval Iceland: private settlement, the popular assembly, and feud. These are not mutually exclusive paths. Instead, they often appear mixed as different moments during a given conflict.

Bagge argues that Snorri described Norwegian politics through the lens of Icelandic feuds, which he knew quite well as a major player in the political game of the island. Like Byock, the author holds that feud was uncommon in reality, and is overrepresented in the sources, but latent feud must have been always in the mind of the parties to a conflict. Bagge distinguishes between two main uses of feud: first, it served the population to settle conflicts; second, it helped the magnates to earn power and influence. He argues that the first use is common in the *Íslendingasögur* while the second is dominant in *Sturlunga saga*, a difference that he attributes to the nature of the sources, with the earlier being more literary and the latter being more directly reflective of power struggles. However, he also notices that this might also reflect a change in the real social structure as the effect of a concentration of power.³⁵

Feud and Gender

Another important dimension of feud concerns its relationship with gender. Carol Clover has shown that, while generally considered male business, feuds could include women as targets of vengeance.³⁶ Their role in feud parallels their infrequent participation in government and politics. Clover argues that medieval Icelandic laws seem to oversimplify reality by denying women any role in them, but she finds the sagas a useful counterbalance to the legal picture.

Clover remarks that legally, women who were involved in the prosecution of feud were considered as men. She argues that, when need arose (when a suitable male responsible was lacking for legal action), daughters could become 'functional sons'. This is related to the fact that this society followed what she, building on the writings of Thomas Laqueur,³⁷ calls a single-sex model (and a single-gender model as well): the only proper way to be was to be a male and a masculine one at that, being female (or feminine) was seen as inferior and negative.³⁸ What is particularly interesting in her argument is that she does not assume this model to apply automatically to men and women in any context. Clover holds that the real divide is between able-bodied men (and dominant women who could be assimilated to them) and everyone else: most women, children, the elderly, and slaves. In this sense, she confirms the notion that feud remains essentially masculine, even while some masculine figures were in fact women.

In an earlier article, Clover discussed in detail a common role for women in saga feud: their role in goading, or whetting, and lamenting.³⁹ There she points out that these roles are two sides of the same coin, and they should be inscribed in the larger function of women in feud, which

is to urge vengeance by word, so men can enact it in deed. In her study she compares Old Norse-Icelandic texts with several other cultural contexts in which lamentation is present, including some where its link with *vendetta* is explicit. She elegantly summarizes: 'the lament (text) serves as a mnemonic of revenge and hence an incitement (subtext)'.⁴⁰ While her main argument is very convincing, her approach can sometimes seem excessively functionalist. For example she holds that the *real function* of mock graves and memorials was to keep alive the idea of revenge, rather than to honour the dead (what she calls the 'ostensible aim').⁴¹ It is hard to prove that this was necessarily true for every participant, as there is no *a priori* reason to consider instrumental actions more real than emotionally driven actions.

Another article examining the role of women in feud is Auður Magnúsdóttir's 'Kvinnor i fejd: Ära, kön och konflikt i det nordiska medeltidssamhället' (Women in Feud: Honour, Kin and Conflict in the Nordic Medieval Society), where she provides a concise view of the situation of women in the feud process.⁴² The text has a detailed discussion of the concept of honour grounded on the work of scholars outside the medieval Scandinavian field, such as Julian Pitt-Rivers and Erling Sandmo. Particular importance is given to the stance adopted by Frank Henderson Stewart, who sees honour as a partly personal, partly social attribute (or more precisely, a right). Thus, she characterizes feminine honour as one of a personal nature, given that social honour was mostly associated with public life.⁴³

Auður Magnúsdóttir describes feud saying that 'the primary purpose of feud was not to destroy one's enemies, but it was, first and foremost, an attempt to assert rights and regain honour'.⁴⁴ She sees feud and honour as closely entwined with matters of kinship, and that it is in these relationships where female participation in feuds is most noticeable in the sagas. Auður Magnúsdóttir summarizes the role of women saying that 'women were the guardians of honour'.⁴⁵ Even if responsibility over women was transferred from father to husband after marriage, they remained members of their blood family.

Auður Magnúsdóttir notices that this situation could create conflicts of interest and illustrates this by analyzing the role of women in feud in *Gísla saga* and *Njáls saga*. From her analysis, she concludes that female honour depends in many cases on the female reaction towards being perceived as having lower standing than that which she, or her family, assigns to herself.⁴⁶ Therefore, Auður Magnúsdóttir argues that female honour is not a form of capital (in the sense of Bourdieu) or a combination of internal and external honour (as with Henderson Stewart's stance). Instead, she says that 'honour becomes mostly a matter of character or personal characteristics'.⁴⁷ Auður Magnúsdóttir points out that this is congruent with the transition to more personalized forms of honour and power that existed in early modern Sweden, thus placing her article in a broader historical context. Her work makes good use of the theoretical background, without being too clearly associated with any specific school, instead being flexible and creative with the use of conceptual frameworks. Feud here is seen as a context for analyzing feminine action and notions of honour, and in this sense her work resembles Miller's. However, it should be noted that here honour is seen as a personal attribute rather than as a commodity.

Feud and Mythology

An issue neglected by other scholars, the link between feud and mythology, has been analysed by John Lindow.⁴⁸ His study on the matter, 'Bloodfeud and Scandinavian Mythology', begins with a short survey of the scholarship on feud. The main theoretical novelty is the reference to Anne Knudsen, who argued that feuds help 'to bring out dualities in otherwise amorphous societies'.⁴⁹ Lindow first analyses how in his *Íslendingabók* (*Book of Icelanders*) Ari fróði Þorgilsson uses a feud story to explain how Iceland was divided into four quarters. Lindow concludes from

this that feud must have been 'a part of the social charter, and therefore myth in a Malinowskian sense'.⁵⁰ In other words, feud served to support and reinforce the existing social structures and divisions. Feud is here therefore treated as part of an ideology, even if it derives from a concrete process. Lindow then proceeds to analyse in the same light mythological literature, such as those compiled in the eddas (i.e., the *eddukvæði* (eddic poetry) and *Snorra Edda*).

Lindow stresses that Norse myths are about conflict, particularly intergroup conflict (gods versus *jötnar*). He aims to assess if these conflicts can be characterized as feuds, and his answer is generally in the affirmative. Following Knudsen, he argues that feud requires 'an absolute if temporary dualism',⁵¹ with factions neatly defined in an us-versus-them relationship. This would be problematic if Norse myths reflected Icelandic bilateral kinship. However, the mythological peoples are unilinear and neatly opposed. Moreover, Lindow argues that the turn-taking and score-keeping typical of feud is not applicable because of mythical time (which allows simultaneous actions) and because gods are immortal (until the death of Baldr).

In short, Lindow identifies the distance between social and mythical realities. Nevertheless, he argues that the mythology is linked to feud because honour is always at stake, an argument that he illustrates in detail. He also refers to parallels in symbolism, including the particular role played by blood both in several feuding societies and in Norse myths, and discusses the reasons why a bilaterally organized society could keep a mythology so clearly agnatic and unilinear. His answer is that myth provided a simpler world, where friends and enemies tend to remain always in the same role. Lindow believes that myths concerning feud might have persisted to give the Icelanders some form of 'wish fulfilment, an alternative to the limitations of a feud society, in which it was imagined that one could attempt genocide on one's opponents without worrying about keeping score'.⁵² Myth therefore serves a social need: providing a way to imagine a world with easier conflict management.

Recent Trends: Beyond Anthropology, Beyond Feud?

During the last decade, interest in matters connected to feud, rather than feud itself, has caught the attention of medievalists working on medieval Iceland. A recent example is David Clark's study on the link between revenge and the Church.⁵³ There he argues that feud can highlight a simple transition from a pre-Christian ethical system that favoured vengeance to a Christian morality which opposed it and instead emphasized reconciliation. His study shows how sources that have traditionally been used to show such a transition, such as *Njáls saga*, reveal on close analysis a more nuanced picture. According to Clark, members of the Icelandic church only slowly conformed to their expected Christian values, in parallel with the progressive separation of secular and ecclesiastic spheres of action.⁵⁴

Clark's study represents a historiography that does not explicitly acknowledge debts to the anthropological school, but follows a tradition of detailed source criticism. Revenge is not analysed inside the structure of feud, but as a phenomenon in itself. His conclusions reveal caution against generalizations. Clark argues, contra Andersson, that 'the sagas are not a homogeneous body of texts, and generalisations about attitudes towards revenge . . . seem less than satisfactory'.⁵⁵ This can be read as a healthy recognition of complexity, but also as detachment from the attempts to find stable patterns or structures that characterize the 'anthropological school'. Texts take precedence over society: the author provides a wealth of examples taken from sagas, theological and diplomatic material, as well as Norwegian laws, but few on structural causes for revenge. In other words, revenge does not appear linked with the context of the transformations of structures of authority and territorialization which, presumably, might have influenced how, why, and when retaliation was enacted.

In a recent study Hugh Firth also tries to depart from the conclusions reached by the anthropological tradition.⁵⁶ Firth argues that revenge killing was not so much a mechanism of reciprocity but one of domination, and criticizes both Miller and Byock for representing the ties between chieftains and followers as ultimately reciprocal. The author notices that in their models feud and revenge were seen as operating through those structures of reciprocity. Firth attempts to use a quantitative approach, rather than the qualitative one usually chosen in the studies surveyed here, to measure homicides and vengeance in both the *Íslendingasögur* and the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas). Firth does not focus on feud itself, which he assumes to be a 'cycle of vengeance',⁵⁷ however, he finds that for the most part, killings are not isolated instances but belong in sequences, and that in most cases the sequences involve chieftains or powerful farmers; homicide by lesser men commonly resulted in the perpetrator attempting to escape. A chieftain often protected his followers by committing revenge killings on their behalf but this also strengthened his own prestige. However, chieftains were also able to initiate the chain of killings to protect their privileged situation, or simply to intimidate. Based on his analysis of the *Íslendingasögur*, and following previous insights from Ross Samson and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Firth argues that chieftains were acting proactively in conflicts, rather than simply 'repaying'.

Shifting the focus to the contemporary sagas, Firth discovers that the genre is characterized by the general absence of homicide by retaliation. This fact suggests that a larger number of cases was handled by arbitration or mediation. The probable cause for this difference between saga genres (or at least their settings) is a change over time in social structures and the rise of more powerful leaders; chiefs with authority over a defined sphere of influence. The later chiefs no longer threatened individual farmers but whole communities. The same larger scale applies to conflicts between these men, who were able to mobilize larger numbers of followers if a violent resolution was needed. In other words, feud and vengeance became less common in later centuries because political struggles between powerful men became ingrained more deeply into hierarchical institutions. After the thirteenth century, farmers did not feud with each other because they became part of a power structure as subjects to a chief's authority. Chiefs did still 'feud' amongst themselves, but these situations are often different to distinguish from warfare or skirmishing. Firth concludes that the language of reciprocity was still used in the sagas to legitimize the actions undertaken, but that in practice some of the killings presented as retribution were simply aggressions or impositions of authority.

Firth acknowledges that his quantitative method requires too many assumptions to function. In any case, it shows the will for methodological renovation. Moreover, the main achievement of this text is to discuss directly the question of the impact of social inequality on conflict resolution, feud included. In Firth's view, medieval Iceland does not resemble the egalitarian societies described by classical ethnography, but it appears clearly as a society which becomes progressively more hierarchical over time. This is undoubtedly an improvement and it resolves some of the difficulties with earlier views: honour becomes less significant, and competitive reciprocity is not seen as leading to equilibrium, but to inequality and domination.

Another interesting new trend is represented by an article written by Hans Jacob Orning.⁵⁸ His study moves the time frame from the Commonwealth era (the focus of most previous studies) to the late Middle Ages, a period of growing interest for both social and literary historians. Orning argues that feud can coexist and even prosper within conditions of a rising central power, informed by previous studies of other regions during the late Middle Ages. He reviews earlier discussions on feud in medieval Iceland and acknowledges that the differences in the understanding of feud between Miller, Helgi Þorláksson, and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson⁵⁹ derive from two factors. The first, concerning duration, is a matter of definition: Miller and Helgi Þorláksson think each settlement ends feud, while Jón Viðar Sigurðsson thinks feuds can outlast

settlements as long as they resurge. The second factor concerns kinship: Helgi Þorláksson believes, contrary to Miller, that individuals can conduct feud, in what seems to be a specific Icelandic trait (derived from its bilateral structure of kinship). Furthermore, Orning notes that the fifteenth century has generally been neglected by scholars and that it has been treated as a period of lawless chaos.⁶⁰

Orning conducts a detailed reading of some diplomatic documentation, and notices that here the disputes resemble lasting rivalries that regularly rekindle. He also notices that the persistent rivalry in these cases also happens to coexist with long-term alliances, even between the same families. Violence was contained and proportional, groups are not clearly defined (because of bilateral kinship), and settlement could be achieved. Therefore, these disputes resemble the classical feuds of previous centuries. The dynamics of power between magnates also remained essentially the same: they competed against each other for followers, and both foreign interests and ideological issues were relatively irrelevant.

Orning then considers the sagas. It is interesting to remark his methodological approach: here sagas refer to the *manuscripts*, not the *texts*. The time of composition becomes unimportant: what matters is the date of the physical means of preservation. This change allows the author to use some texts that have earlier or disputed dating as sources for the period analysed. The fictional romances, both the indigenous *riddarasögur* (chivalric sagas) and the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas), are considered useful sources because they reveal traces of the values, the 'mental frame' of the era;⁶¹ variation is seen as crucially important because it reveals change.⁶² Orning identifies several recurrent patterns by a detailed analysis of the fifteen sagas compiled in a single manuscript (AM 343 a 4to). He concludes that these stories, while superficially representing a world very different from that of the feud-ridden *Íslendingasögur*, preserve the basic pattern of conflict management.

In brief, Orning shows that beneath the surface of a monarchic society, local feud politics remained fundamentally unaltered, as reflected both by diplomatic and literary texts. His study shows an innovative approach to the understanding of literature, both in the type of texts used and in its methodological principles. The range of evidence used is somewhat limited, but this is partly because of the scarcity of sources for the period in question. The main methodological background remains the anthropological approach, proving that such an approach remains both essentially valid and productive, but also open to further innovation.

Final Remarks

This chapter has presented an overview of research on feuds in medieval Icelandic society, within which some broad trends can be distinguished. The earliest texts discussed feud as an aspect of the literary world of the sagas. As this literary world was recognized to be closely entwined with social reality, studies developed on the social dynamics of feud, most often in close connection with the anthropological tradition. The studies tended to focus on both the structure and the meaning of feud, on the individual reactions to and the systemic constraints of feud, but also closely examined more specific themes, such as its link to gender and mythology.

The last decade has seen a renewal in the anthropological approach, with recent studies either moving away from the anthropological paradigm or adapting its time frame to the study of the late Middle Ages. Moreover, feud itself appears to have become, paradoxically, both too specific and too broad a term. Studies can include it as part of a broader social concern (for example, the resolution of disputes), or it can be considered as a background for more specific issues (such as revenge). In any case, after four decades of scholarly debate, it appears indisputable that feud played a very significant role in the social and literary life of medieval Iceland.

Notes

- 1 The bibliography is immense. Particularly influential for the Norse field are Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Enactment and Management of Conflict in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987; Jacob Black-Michaud, *Feuding Societies*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975.
- 2 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940, 5–6.
- 3 Leopold Pospíšil, *Anthropology of Law: A Comparative Theory*. New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1974, 9.
- 4 Max Gluckman, 'The Peace in the Feud,' *Past & Present* 8 (1955), 1–14.
- 5 *The Nuer* has the methodological traits typical of structural-functionalism: an interest in the global dynamics of the system and a synchronic view. By contrast, individual agency or the aspects of feud that could induce social change were generally minimized.
- 6 Gluckman, 'Peace in the Feud,' 5.
- 7 Gluckman, 'Peace in the Feud,' 13.
- 8 J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Long-Haired Kings and Other Studies in Frankish History*. London, Methuen, 1962; Robert Rees Davies, 'The Survival of the Blood Feud in Medieval Wales,' *History* 54 (1969), 338–57. For a good overview on scholarship on medieval feud see Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm, 'The Study of Feud in Medieval and Early Modern History,' *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2007, 9–68. On the broader issue of the use of legal anthropology by medievalists, see the survey by Hans Jacob Orning, *Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages*. Leiden, Brill, 2008, 10–34.
- 9 Victor Turner, 'An anthropological approach to the Icelandic Saga,' *The Translation of Culture: Essays to E.E. Evans-Pritchard*, ed. T. O. Beidelman, London, Routledge, (1971) 2001, 349–74.
- 10 Jesse L. Byock's study from 1980, that predates that of Andersson and Miller, will be discussed later in the chapter. Other important scholarly contributions related to the study of feud are Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. Joan Turville-Petre. Odense, Odense University Press, 1983, originally published as *Norrønt mid: Forestillingen om den umandige mand i de islandske sagaer*. Odense, Odense universitetsforlag, 1980, and Kristen Hastrup, *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland: An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*. London, Oxford University Press, 1985.
- 11 Theodore M. Andersson and William Ian Miller, *Law and Literature in Medieval Iceland: Ljósvefninga Saga and Valla-Ljóts Saga*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1989. The specific section on feud is on pages 22–31, but feud is alluded to recurrently along the book.
- 12 Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 22.
- 13 Andreas Heusler, *Zum isländischen Fehdewesen in der Sturlungenzeit*. Berlin, n.p., 1912.
- 14 Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 25.
- 15 On class and relationships between upper and lower strata of society see also Hans Jacob Orning's chapter in the present volume.
- 16 Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, 55.
- 17 William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990. The same author has published various other texts about Icelandic feud, which precede his view in the book reviewed here. See William Ian Miller, 'Choosing the Avenger: Some Aspects of the Blood-Feud in Medieval Iceland and England,' *Law and History Review* 1, 2 (1983), 159–204; Miller, 'Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud,' *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983), 316–44, reprinted with revisions as Miller, 'The Central Feud in *Njáls saga*,' *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, New York, Garland, 1989, 292–322.
- 18 Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 182–85.
- 19 This argument is clearly influenced by the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, who studied feuding among the Kabyle of Algeria and tried to find a point of equilibrium between the determinist tradition of French social thought and methodological individualism.
- 20 Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30.
- 21 Gunnar Karlsson, review of *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, by William Ian Miller, *Alvíssmál* 4 (1994), 125–128. For further criticism of Miller's thesis, see the articles in *Sæmdamenn: Um heiður á Þjóðveldisöld*, ed. Helgi Þorláksson. Reykjavík, Hugvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2001.

- 22 Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 204.
- 23 Miller also describes the institutional setting that sought to regulate and limit feud. He mentions laws which sought to regulate killing and wounding and provides a solid account of the effect of the Church in creating spaces of sanctuary and in seeking to avoid blood vengeance. There is also an account of more practical constraints in the exercise of the feud. For example, it was more difficult and more dangerous to retaliate against an important person who had greater connections and could become involved in the feud. Miller successfully considers the flexible nature of a cognatic kinship system in his description of feud dynamics, giving it a more privileged place than the political links (the chieftain-follower tie) emphasized by other authors (such as Jesse L. Byock, see below). Concerning gender, he demonstrates that the ideology of honour was focused on males, and that typically the targets for vengeance were males, even if it is possible that women were targets for other types of aggression (such as rape). This of course does not preclude women from participating in feud in other roles, the typical one being that of instigator. His discussion of gender was later expanded by other scholars, as discussed below.
- 24 Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.
- 25 Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, 143–60.
- 26 Jesse L. Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, reworked and expanded as *Viking Age Iceland*. London, Penguin, 2001.
- 27 Jesse L. Byock, 'Dispute Resolution in the Sagas,' *Gripla* 6 (1984), 86–100; Byock, 'Narrating Saga Feud: Deconstructing The Fundamental Oral Progression,' *Sagnáping helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, vol. 1, eds. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994, 97–106; Byock, 'Choices of Honor: Telling Saga Feud, *Tháttir*, and the Fundamental Oral Progression,' *Oral Tradition* 10, 1 (1995), 166–80; Byock, 'Defining Feud: Talking Points and Iceland's Saga Women,' *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2007, 95–112.
- 28 Jesse L. Byock, 'Feuding in Viking Age Iceland's Great Village,' *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*, eds. Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003, 229–41.
- 29 Byock, 'Iceland's Great Village,' 235–37.
- 30 The materialist tradition influencing Byock seems to be Cultural Materialism, rather than some form of Marxism. This would explain the emphasis on meaning and culture (that Cultural Materialism inherited from the Boasian tradition) and the lack of reference to structural contradictions.
- 31 Byock, 'Iceland's Great Village,' 241.
- 32 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Feud and Feuding in the Early and High Middle Ages: Working Descriptions and Continuity,' *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Jeppe Büchert Netterstrøm and Bjørn Poulsen, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2007, 69–94. By the same author on feud, see Helgi Þorláksson, 'Hvað er blóðhefnd?' *Sagnáping helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994*, vol. 1, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Reykjavík, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1994, 389–414; Helgi Þorláksson, 'Feider: Begrep, betyding, komparasjon,' *Feide og fred i nordisk middelalder*, ed. Erik Opsahl, Oslo, Unipub, 2007, 21–34. See also Peter Oestmann, 'Blutrache und Fehde in isländischen Quellen,' *Leges – Gentes – Regna: Zur Rolle von germanischen Rechtsgewohnheiten und lateinischer Schrifttradition bei der Ausbildung der frühmittelalterlichen Rechtskultur*, eds. Gerhard Dilcher and Eva-Marie Distler, Berlin, Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2006, 391–414.
- 33 Helgi Þorláksson, 'Feud and Feuding,' 82.
- 34 Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 75–89.
- 35 Here Bagge appears equidistant between a historiographical tradition that saw *Sturlunga* as a reliable source but distrusted the *Íslendingasögur* as sources, and the 'anthropological approach' that finds both types of saga reliable sources and explains the differences between them in sociological terms.
- 36 Carol Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe,' *Representations* 44 (1993), 1–28.
- 37 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's chapter in the present volume also discussed Laquer's single-sex model.
- 38 Clover, 'Regardless of Sex,' 12–13.
- 39 Carol Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament,' *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, eds. John Lindow, Lars Lönnroth, and Gerd Wolfgang Weber,

- Odense, Odense University Press, 1986, 141–83. Whetting is also discussed in Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir's chapter in the present volume.
- 40 Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament,' 169.
- 41 Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament,' 173.
- 42 Auður Magnúsdóttir (as Audur Magnusdottir), 'Kvinnor i fejd: Ära, kön och konflikt i det nordiska medeltidssamhället.' *Feide og fred i nordisk middelalder*, ed. Erik Opsahl, Oslo, Unipub, 2007, 73–84. See also Alison Finlay, 'Níð, Adultery and Feud in Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa.' *Saga-Book* 23 (1990–1993), 158–78.
- 43 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd,' 77.
- 44 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd,' 77–78.
- 45 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd,' 79.
- 46 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd,' 82.
- 47 Auður Magnúsdóttir, 'Kvinnor i fejd,' 83.
- 48 John Lindow, 'Bloodfeud and Scandinavian Mythology.' *Alvíssmál* 4 (1994), 51–68.
- 49 Lindow, 'Bloodfeud,' 53. See also Anne Knudsen, 'Internal Unrest: Corsican Vendetta – a Structured Catastrophe.' *Folk* 27 (1985), 65–87.
- 50 Lindow, 'Bloodfeud,' 55.
- 51 Lindow, 'Bloodfeud,' 57.
- 52 Lindow, 'Bloodfeud,' 65.
- 53 David Clark, 'Revenge and Moderation: The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland.' *Leeds Studies in English* 36 (2005), 133–56.
- 54 The 'Peace of God' movement (that sought to limit violence against unarmed people), the role of churches as sanctuary, combined with the noticeable economic advantages of control over Church structures likely contributed to the consolidation of centralized power among the Icelandic elite and therefore to the decline of feud as the main mechanism of social control during the twelfth and thirteenth century. See Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Process of State Formation in Medieval Iceland.' *Viator* 40, 2 (2009), 151–70 and Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Peace of God in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries.' *Sacri canones servandi sunt Ius canonicum et status ecclesiae saeculis XIII–XV*, ed. Pavel Krafl, Prague, Institute of History, 2008, 205–13. See also Sverrir Jakobsson's chapter in the present volume.
- 55 See Theodore M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas.' *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Tucker, New York, Garland, 1989, 40–70; David Clark, 'Revenge and Moderation,' 152.
- 56 Hugh Firth, 'Coercion, Vengeance, Feud and Accommodation: Homicide in Medieval Iceland.' *Early Medieval Europe* 20, 2 (2012), 139–75.
- 57 Firth, 'Feud and Accommodation,' 142.
- 58 Hans Jacob Orning, 'Feuds and Conflict Resolution in Fact and Fiction in Late Medieval Iceland'. *Legislation and State Formation. Norway and its neighbours in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steinar Imsen, Trondheim, Akademika forlag, 2013, 229–262.
- 59 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has a detailed discussion of the role of chieftains in conflict resolution, but feud itself is not discussed extensively. See Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*. Odense, Odense University Press, 1999, 151–85.
- 60 The exception he finds is in an article by Helgi Þorláksson discussing a late medieval institution, *heimreið* (home riding), which is comparable to a ritualized and aristocratic form of feud.
- 61 Orning, 'Feuds and Conflict Resolution,' 245.
- 62 It is possible that his stance is influenced by both Annales historiography and by new philology (material philology).

24 CLASS

Hans Jacob Orning

This chapter on class in Old Norse society focuses on Iceland and Norway between roughly 900 and 1400. Such framing has been selected in accordance with our source material, the sagas. Although the sagas are late medieval,¹ many cover topics from before 1100 while others were produced well after 1300. Moreover, a great number of sagas concern Norway and its relations with Iceland. Thus, this article begins with the settlement of Iceland and the unification of Norway around the year 900 and finishes around the year 1400 in order to include aspects of late medieval manuscript production and the flourishing of legendary sagas (*foraldarsögur*) and indigenous chivalric sagas (*ridðarasögur*, sometimes also referred to as *fornasögur suðurlanda*).² Other sources than the sagas must occasionally be mentioned, as the concept of class directs attention towards economic processes where archaeological, legal, and cameral sources can supplement our understanding. However, the chapter does not provide a full overview of such sources.

The chapter falls under three headings: The first deals with the social structure in the early phase – the formation of Icelandic society, concomitant with the establishment of the Norwegian kingdom – as reflected in saga sources. The second analyses the social dynamic in Norway and Iceland between 900 and 1300. The third investigates conditions subsequent to the implementation of Norwegian overlordship in Iceland in 1262–1264, since the post-commonwealth era is the primary period of saga manuscript production – and since the sociopolitical development in the two realms shows some interesting similarities which have only recently received scholarly attention.

Before we begin, it is important to have a consensus on what we mean by 'class', which can be defined in a number of ways. The Marxist view of class as a social reflection of the production process, wherein the determinant is ownership of productive property, is the classical definition. Class in this tradition refers to an antagonistic relationship between groups – even if they themselves are not conscious of this identity (so-called 'false consciousness') – and class struggle thus forms the driving force of human history. Max Weber defines class more loosely as an ideal type which need neither be 'real' nor constitute a causal factor in history in the same manner as in the Marxist tradition.³ Related to the Marxist notion of class is Max Weber's concept of status groups, which puts decisive emphasis on honour and prestige in the formation of (leading) strata in society.⁴ This definition is more akin to the medieval understanding of social differentiation in terms of estates. Pierre Bourdieu has further expanded the notion of class to include social and symbolic capital.⁵