



Honour, Kinship and Politics: The Underlying Mechanisms of Feud in the *Íslendingasögur*

Josie Day

The *Íslendingasögur* are distinct among other saga genres in their focus on the social, political and legal spheres of early Icelandic society. Much of this is done through the feud process. Byock and Miller argue that the Icelandic legal system was constructed in order to control and channel the feud process, with Byock suggesting that Iceland 'organised [...] its entire society, to assist and expedite the resolution of feud'¹ and Miller describing feud as 'part of the natural order of things'.²

Iceland's geographical isolation and relatively late settlement led to a unique and sophisticated political and legal system. Byock effectively summarises the role of feud within this system as channelling violence into 'a socially stabilizing process'.³ The law was represented in the figure of the *lögmaðr*, the lawspeaker, who recited one third of the law each year at the Alþing and would be expected to refer to laws during court sessions. Iceland had an extremely complex and thorough set of laws but no executive arm through which to enforce them. Disputes were therefore settled at the local Þing or, if that was impossible, at the yearly Alþing. If the legal system could not provide a satisfactory resolution, the insulted party might begin to seek blood vengeance.

Miller presents the feud as 'often moral, frequently juridical, and always political'.⁴ This is certainly the case in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, which is overwhelmingly concerned with the Icelandic legal and political system. This essay seeks to examine the mechanisms of feud beyond its legal processes, exploring its impact on social and political relations. The escalation of the central feud in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is triggered by both Njáll and his political rivals seeking to influence the feud to advance their own political ambitions. The involvement of so many people with individual motivations and goals makes it increasingly difficult for Njáll to control the feud, and eventually the fallout reaches the Alþing, which descends into chaos.

The popular image of the Icelandic feud as a chaotic spiral of vengeance killings fails to acknowledge the reality that most of the action took place in the law courts. Disputes were brought to local assemblies and the Alþing, spaces which were central to 'upholding one's honor and fulfilling one's obligations to kinsmen to defend theirs'.⁵ The public nature of this struggle for honour, which played out in the assemblies and courts, led to an underlying competitiveness in disputes and feuds. This is reflected in the Icelandic term *mannjafnaðr*, meaning 'man-comparing' or 'man-matching', and suggests that honour was to some extent performative. The public nature of this struggle, which played out in the public space of the assemblies and courts, means that honour was to some extent performative. Observers of a dispute expected certain actions and reactions from those involved - Miller suggests that men who were 'too eager to give up on vengeance' were regarded with contempt, even as peaceful men and negotiation were praised by the same system.⁶ In cases where blood revenge was deemed appropriate, it was therefore still proper to counsel peaceful settlement, even when it was not expected or desired, and for small, easily-settled claims to be accompanied by declarations of blood vengeance. This performative honour lends itself well to the feud, which includes disputes and settlements at the local Þing or Alþing as well as the attacks and fights between disputing parties. In fact, such attacks are often a reaction to an unsatisfactory legal settlement or a sense of being dishonoured.

In *Eyrbyggja saga* Snorri goði hosts a great feast for *Vetrnætr*, the festival marking the beginning of the winter season. The question of who is the greatest chieftain in their district arises. Unsurprisingly, most people claim that Snorri goði is 'þótti gøfgastr maðr',⁷ but Thorleif Kimbi is among those who insist that Arnkell is the greater chieftain. Such an admission from Snorri's own supporters indicates the threat Arnkell posed to his power base. Later that winter, Snorri goði and his supporters ambush and kill Arnkell while he is bringing in hay. The narrative emphasises his great reputation ('at

¹ Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (London: University of California Press, 1982), p. 27.

² William Miller, *Bloodtaking & Peacemaking: Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 182.

³ Byock, *Feud*, p. 2.

⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 181.

⁵ Richard Bauman, 'Performance and Honor in 13th-Century Iceland', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 99 (1986) p. 143

⁶ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, pp. 198-190.

⁷ Einar Ól Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga; Brands þáttur orva; Eiríks saga rauða; Grœnlendinga saga; Grœnlendinga þáttur* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1954), p. 98.

hann hefir verit allra manna bezt')⁸ as well as his envy-inspiring legal skill ('hafði hann ok jafnan inn hæra hlut í málaferlum,')⁹ both of which make him clear rivals to Snorri goði's reputation.

In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, characters who wish to dishonour Njáll often use his inability to grow a beard as the basis of their insult. Hallgerðr nicknames Njáll 'skegglausam',¹⁰ '[Old] Beardless'. She then states that the Njálssons see themselves as 'helzt menn',¹¹ 'exceedingly manly', and suggests that they should be nicknamed 'taðskeggingam',¹² 'Dung-Beardlings'. Her choices of nickname and Sigmundur's slanderous verses question the masculinity of Njáll and his sons, providing the Njálssons with a fresh excuse to kill Sigmundur, who was involved in the killing of their foster-father Þórðr. Gunnarr's furious reaction to Hallgerðr and Sigmundur's slander, his lack of interest in pursuing compensation for Sigmundur's death for three years, his failure to criticise the Njálssons for their actions, and his statement that 'fyrir löngu var han bœtt'¹³ all imply his awareness of the gravity of the insult, and the necessity of avenging it to restore their family's honour.

Icelandic ideas of kinship and loyalty were also shaped by the feud. Even blood kinship was an active relationship which had to be reinforced with support and hospitality. There was a deeply practical nature to the concept of kinship, particularly in the light of the blood feud. Interventions by kin were often a means of resolution in disputes, and family patriarchs or kin with a higher social status frequently arbitrated on behalf of or alongside their kin. Arbitration enabled those who may be indirectly impacted by the feud to influence its outcome. The motivation for this was a concept which Miller terms 'collective liability' in which the target of vengeance need not be the guilty party - as when the Njálssons hold Þráinn Sigfússon responsible for Þórðr's death, though he did not fatally wound him - or, indeed, the avenger need not be the person most wronged.¹⁴

Active interest from kin or allies often came in the form of legal advice or arbitration, finding a resolution to the dispute on behalf of the principals. Arbitration aimed to resolve disputes and ensure they did not develop into a feud which kin and allies would then be called upon to participate in. Miller suggests that since arbitration necessitated a specific grievance, limiting the process to resolving smaller disputes, rather than underlying tensions or issues, it failed to genuinely resolve the feud.¹⁵

Both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga* provide examples of skilled arbitrators. Arnkell goði's skill in arbitration and legal advice is demonstrated in his handling of the feud between his nephew Þórarinn svarti and Þorbjorn digri. Þórarinn's successfully defends his mother Geirrið against accusations of witchcraft at the Þórsnes Assembly, which incites animosity from Þorbjorn and Snorri goði, whose failed case brought them 'óvirðing'.¹⁶ Later when his horses begin to go missing, Þorbjorn attempts to search Þórarinn's farm. The standoff escalates to a fight after goading from Þórarinn's mother, Geirrið, and Þórarinn kills Þorbjorn.

Þórarinn's awareness of the alliance between Þorbjorn and Snorri goði means he immediately seeks the support of his uncles, Vermund and Arnkell goði. Arnkell's quick thinking and legal expertise mean he can predict the possible outcomes of the legal case, allowing Þórarinn to prepare to leave Iceland as he cannot afford to pay the expected compensation. This ensures that Snorri can only claim compensation in goods, not blood, and the narrator underlines that this ended the case ('ok lauk svá þessum málum').¹⁷ In this example, it is clear that a strong support base from one's kin can be invaluable in resolving and calming disputes.

Much of the arbitration in *Brennu-Njáls saga* is carried out by Njáll himself. The saga author introduces Njáll as 'lögmaðr svá mikill, at engi fannsk hans jafningi',¹⁸ and his skill is constantly demonstrated as he arbitrates on behalf of his good friend, Gunnarr Hámundarson, and his own sons. However, Njáll rarely secures the Njálssons' agreement before a settlement, instead informing them afterwards and making them swear to keep to the terms. This is a successful strategy until the death of their beloved foster-father Þórðr. The Njálssons break their oath and kill Þráinn Sigfússon, who was present at the killing, using a more recent disagreement as their excuse.

Njáll sees the opportunity to use kinship bonds to calm the Bergþórsknoll-Sigfússon feud which, with the deaths of Þórðr and Þráinn, escalates beyond the regular pattern of balance and reciprocity outlined by Miller – significant members of the family are now involved, and the

⁸ Sveinsson and Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 103.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰ Einar Ól Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1954), p. 113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

¹⁴ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 180.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

¹⁶ Sveinsson and Þórðarson, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 57.

compensation costs are rapidly increasing. Njáll's decision to adopt Hǫskuldr Brainsson as his foster-son is an attempt to build a kinship bond with the Sigfússon clan and consequently calm the feud. Hǫskuldr is presented as a kindred spirit to Njáll, disinclined to blood violence and content with the legal settlement for his father's death – unlike the notoriously hot-headed Njálssons. His peacemaking influence appears successful, since after he throws a feast the Sigfússons and Njálssons declare that 'engir skyldu komask í meðal þeira'.¹⁹

Miller describes the foster-bond as 'running as deep as, if not deeper than, that between parent and child'.²⁰ The strong affection in fostering relationships is evident in Njáll's relationship with Hǫskuldr – after his death Njáll declares at the Þing that he loved him more than his own sons ('ek unna meira Hǫskuldi en sonum mínum')²¹ – as well as the Njálssons' furious reaction to the death of their foster-father Þórðr leysingjason, and their slow and deliberate vengeance against his killers.

Byock argues that 'as the action moves closer and closer to the center of the family or of political power, the consequences and complications become more serious'.²² This is evident in *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where the death of Þórðr leysingjason provides a catalyst for the Njálssons' growing involvement in the Bergþórsknoll-Sigfússon feud. Rather than a regular pattern of balance and reciprocity in which the deaths are lowly servants, guilty parties are clearly identifiable and the vengeance taken is contained, the feud begins to spiral out of control as more and more people become involved.

Miller views feud as 'one of the key structures in which the competition for power, the struggle for dominance, is played out'.²³ This struggle for dominance is evident in the central feuds in both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*. However, there is a significant difference in the nature of these power struggles. In *Eyrbyggja saga*, the central feud is between two powerful men, Snorri goði and Arnkell goði, who are trying to encroach on one another's power spheres. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, on the other hand, the power struggle is that of 'a family [...] on the rise'²⁴ whose ambitions show no signs of slowing down. Njáll's political and legal talents are central to this ascent, as well as to controlling the feud between his family and the Sigfússon clan, but eventually his skills fail in the face of a feud which has 'metastasized into something he has never seen before'.²⁵ The involvement of increasing numbers of people with individual political goals and motivations causes the feud at the heart of *Brennu-Njáls saga* to spiral out of control, to the extent that a battle breaks out at the Alþing, the heart of Icelandic political and legal life.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri goði and Arnkell goði bring disputes to the law courts both against one another and on behalf of their *þingmen*, and their feud ends only with Arnkell's death. Both men hold the status of *goði*, indicating their wealth and status, which means that they had the power, resources and a clear political motivation to continue the feud – any concession would mean dishonour, and a consequent loss of power and influence. This is an archetypal feud – two wealthy participants of relatively equal social standing, competing for honour and political power in the public space of the assemblies and courts.

The law is demonstrated to be capable of providing a settlement to a feud between these two extremely powerful chieftains, but their significant power suggests that the feud would only ever have ended with one of their deaths - particularly when Snorri goði was involved, a man renowned for his 'langrækr ok heiptúðigr'²⁶ disposition. The resolution of the feud comes in the form of a legal settlement for Arnkell's death, which is described as not fittingly honourable for such a 'mikinn hǫfðingja'.²⁷ In fact, his death leads to legal reform: a new law is passed changing the prosecution of manslaughter, to ensure that such cases are appropriately prosecuted.

Unlike in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where the central feud is between two men with established positions and political power, the authority of Njáll's family in *Brennu-Njáls saga* rests in the figure of Njáll himself, in particular his legal knowledge and foresight. His family are not members of the *goðar* class, but he exerts a great deal of influence in his alliance with Gunnarr Hámandarson. Initially their strong friendship withstands the growing feud between their families, and Njáll's legal skills ensure that each death is appropriately compensated for, but as those implicated become closer to his immediate family, 'the consequences and complications become more serious'²⁸ and the number of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 277.

²⁰ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 171.

²¹ Ibid., p. 309.

²² Byock, *Feud*, p. 190.

²³ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 181.

²⁴ William Miller, 'Why is your axe bloody?': *A Reading of Njáls Saga* (Croydon: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 196.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁶ *Eyrbyggja*, p. 26.

²⁷ Ibid., p.103.

²⁸ Byock, *Feud*, p. 190.

people involved grows, making the feud much harder for Njáll to predict and control. The escalation of the feud is arguably driven by other significant figures who see potential to further their own political ambitions and involve themselves in the feud in order to sway its outcome in their own favour.

The alliance between Gunnarr and Njáll creates a unique political situation. Despite neither holding the prestigious position of *goði*, they are influential and powerful figures. When Gunnarr dies the end of their alliance creates a power vacuum in their district.²⁹ Njáll and his sons work quickly in order to establish themselves as an independent power and eliminate their political competition. Njáll's legal skill and knowledge allow him to appropriate the principles of honour and revenge for his own political purposes.³⁰ Though he is not Gunnarr's kin, he directs the vengeance process – and in doing so, targets some of his own political opponents such as Geirr *goði*, and his 'chief local opposition' Starkaðr Barkarson and his son Þorgeirr.³¹ Another local rival, Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, is threatened into paying the compensation claims on behalf of Skarpheðinn and Hǫgni.

Hǫskuldr Þrainsson's rise to power is deliberately orchestrated by Njáll in order to further his own family's political ambitions. Njáll is aware that his family need to gain a *goðorð* in order to cement the power that he has been building. Since none of these unelected offices are currently for sale, Njáll sabotages legal cases and proposes reforming the law and creating the *fimmtardómr*, the Fifth Court, thereby creating a new *goðorð* which is granted to Hǫskuldr. This astounding manipulation of the law allows him to achieve two political ends in one – firstly, he is able to secure Hǫskuldr's marriage to Hildigunnur, a woman from a well-connected and powerful family, and secondly, his family finally has links to a *goðorð*, legitimising his power and influence.

However, Njáll's promotion of his beloved foster-son has devastating consequences and reignites the Bergþórsknoll-Sigfússon feud. The Njálssons are deeply insulted by Hǫskuldr's rise to power, particularly after the death of their own half-brother Hǫskuldr, whom they feel was not appropriately avenged. Their ally in this attack is Mǫrðr Valgarðsson, who has also been feuding intermittently with the Sigfússons for around 30 years. Miller highlights that 'Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði is the successor to both [Þráinn and Gunnarr] [...] and the coalescence of these persons in his person brings about a correlative alliance between the enemies of the Sigfússons of the prior generation'.³² Mǫrðr Valgarðsson is a major antagonist to both Gunnar and Njáll throughout the saga, having particularly envied Gunnar ('Hann ǫfundaði mjök Gunnar')³³ and his actions are the most obvious example of other political players who take advantage of the Sigfússon-Bergþórsknoll feud.

Mǫrðr's manipulative nature is most evident in two events: the death of Þorgeirr Otkelsson and his orchestrations with the Njálssons. Mǫrðr is aware of Njáll's prophecy that killing both Otkell and his son Þorgeirr would lead to his death, and orchestrates his death at the hands of Gunnarr. Later, as Hǫskuldr Hvítanessgoði grows into his new position he becomes a serious political threat to Mǫrðr. Aware that the Njálssons deeply resent Hǫskuldr, he constantly slanders him in their presence and provokes them into attacking him. ('Mǫrðr rægir Hǫskuld at vanða ... ok eggjar einart Skarpheðinn ok þá at drepa Hǫskuld').³⁴

The Njálssons are the sole targets of vengeance for Hǫskuldr's murder, as their already imposing reputation allows Mǫrðr to eliminate his rival and escape the consequences. As Miller comments, Mǫrðr is aware that 'politics will trump justice'³⁵ and skilfully manipulates the Njálssons into killing their foster-brother.

The chaotic scenes at the Alþing after the Burning illustrates the destructive impact of the Sigfússon-Bergþórsknoll feud on Icelandic society. The fragile nature of peace is reflected in the landscape of the Þingvellir, which is the meeting point of two tectonic plates. The island is literally splitting in two, and the potential for a social split comes twice in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. In the Conversion episode, Pagans and Christians declare themselves separate from one another, and it is only through the wisdom of Þorgeirr *goði* that the potential conflict is resolved. The second instance comes after the Trial of the Burners, where the normal channels of law through which feud is tempered - settlement, arbitration, and outlawry - are unsatisfactory to Þórhallr, Njáll's foster-son and the greatest lawyer in Iceland at the time, who kills Grímr *rauði* and initiates the battle. While the conversion episode demonstrates 'how well the Alþing and its law could work to maintain the peace'³⁶ in the face of societal breakdown, here the usual processes of the Alþing fail to contain the feud. The potential for

²⁹ William Miller, 'The Central Feud in Njals Saga', in *Sagas of the Icelanders: A Book of Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), p. 314.

³⁰ Miller, 'Why is your axe bloody?', p. 144.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³² Miller, 'Central Feud', p. 319.

³³ Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

³⁵ Miller, 'Why is your axe bloody?', p. 196.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

violence is emphasised in the description of both sides arming themselves and marking their helmets before the trial begins. ('Bjoggu þeir þá sik til hváirtveggju ok vápnuðusk ... herkulml á hjálmum sínum').³⁷ This is not preparation for a legal process, but preparation for battle. It is clear that nobody expected the trial to end with a peaceful settlement. This feud has surpassed, and indeed triggered a near-collapse of, the workings of the Icelandic legal system.

Feud was an inherently political process. Some of it played out in the public space of the Þing and Alþing, and therefore had a significant impact on the honour and reputation of those involved. The feud also influenced how people related to one another. Good relations with one's kin were important, as they could arbitrate on your behalf in the law courts and provide a strong base of support. Characters such as Njáll and Arnkell goði are renowned for their legal expertise, and skilfully arbitrate on behalf of their friends and kin.

But the feud was, above all else, a political process. In *Eyrbyggja saga* the story is that of two powerful *goðar*, locked in a struggle for power and influence. In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, the story is that of a family on the rise. Njáll's family are wealthy farmers with aspirations to greatness, and the feud escalates not only because of their own ambitions but also because characters such as Mjörðr Valgarðsson seek to influence events in their own favour.

Initially, while the feud in *Brennu-Njáls saga* adheres to Miller's model of 'balance and reciprocity',³⁸ Njáll is able to predict, influence and settle the various disputes. But over time the feud becomes too complex, and Njáll can no longer control the Njálssons' actions or manipulate events to his advantage. After Bergþórshvoll is burned the feud causes the heart of Icelandic legal and political life, the Alþing, to descend into chaos, reflecting the way that the Bergþórshvoll-Sigfússon feud itself transcends the limits of the Icelandic legal system.

³⁷ Sveinsson, *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 378.

³⁸ Miller, *Bloodtaking*, p. 182.

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