

ABSTRACT

The Prover of Weapons and the Maker of War

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From sports, teams to modern media the Norse warriors of the Viking age often symbolize extreme or idealized masculinity. However, how did these Norsemen view their own masculinity? What traits did they perceive as essential to being a man and a warrior? Throughout my thesis, I will answer these questions through an examination of nine selections from the vast range of saga literature produced in medieval Iceland. For these individuals their identity as warrior bonded closely with their identity as men. The heroes, outlaws, and kings in these sagas exhibit important ideal traits like courage, wisdom, honor, ferocity, wealth, and kingly sovereignty. The writers of the sagas used legendary and historical figures to present a picture of ideal masculinity. An analysis of Norse masculinity reveals how these men perceived themselves and their ancestors. In addition, it illustrates how literature influences masculinity within a culture.

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THE PROVER OF WEAPONS AND THE MARER OF WAR

An analysis of Norse Masculinity as represented in the Sagas

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INTRODUCTION

Frameworks of Masculinity

From the time when they traveled everywhere, pillaging and raiding the Norse warriors of the Viking Age have possessed a strong connection to masculinity. The image of tall, broad shouldered Viking warriors in chain mail and furs splashing ashore from their long ship resonates across the centuries in Western culture. Featured in numerous aspects of modern culture including books, games, TV shows and movies, Vikings represent masculinity and strength. For example, Erika Ruth Sigurdson states in her article *Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction*, “The figure of the Viking often represents a very specific form of masculinity, one that encompasses notions of violence, dominance, and other aggressive traits.”¹ However, this legacy raises the question: if Norse warriors stand so strongly as examples of masculinity, how did they perceive their own masculinity? What does it mean to be a man and a warrior in early medieval Norse culture? How do they represent and discuss masculinity in their own literature? In order to understand and evaluate Norse masculinity this thesis will evaluate ideal Norse masculinity as presented in the three major genres of the Icelandic Sagas: Legendary Sagas, Family Sagas, and Kings’ Sagas. As the primary source of written materials on Viking and medieval Norse society, the Icelandic saga corpus lends itself well to an evaluation of masculinity. The saga is a form of literature that combines poetry and prose to form a narrative often focused on a particular family or

¹ Erika Ruth Sigurdson, “Violence and Historical Authenticity: Rape (and Pillage) in Popular Viking Fiction,” *Scandinavian Studies* 86, no. 3 (2014): 86, <https://doi.org/10.5406/scanstud.86.3.0249>.

individual. Based on early oral tradition and Eddic poetry, the written versions of the saga appeared in Iceland sometime during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.² These sagas offer a rare window into the beliefs and ideals of Norse culture. However, before embarking on an evaluation of ideal masculinity as presented in the sagas it is important to look at modern theories of masculinity and to give some background on the Norse view of masculinity. These two lenses offer excellent perspectives on how masculinity is constructed and idealized within a society. Both modern scholarship and medieval Norse writings offer frameworks for the examination of saga masculinity.

One of the main lenses used when studying masculinity is modern theoretical scholarship on gender. Much sweat and ink has gone in to developing conceptual models of masculinity that add interesting nuances to an examination of masculinity in the Icelandic sagas. Much of the difficulty when studying masculinity stems from controversy over the ideal of masculinity itself. Critics argue that the very concept of masculinity imposes a false binary reality not born out in society. In addition, researchers have claimed that discussions of masculinity tend to group individuals together arbitrarily.³ The origins of masculinity in a society are also a subject of considerable debate. Two primary theories drive this discussion the “essentialist perspective” and the “social constructionist perspective.” Everitt-Penhale and Kopano define the essentialist perspective as a perspective, “. . . wherein gender is viewed as a fixed and inherent

² Jesse L. Byock, ed., *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1999), 2–4.

³ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2005): 836–838, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

characteristic of individuals,”⁴ According to this perspective gender is innate. In contrast, “from a social constructionist perspective masculinity and femininity are not seen as stemming from individual women’s and men’s minds and bodies, but rather as that which is socially constructed as being appropriate, natural or desirable for each gender.”⁵ This theory is more prominent in most scholarship today and Everitt-Penhale and Kopano utilize it in developing their theory of masculinity. Assuming this theory then it appears likely that, “Constructions of masculinity vary between and within different geographical, historical and situational contexts; proscribe and prescribe certain behaviors and characteristics for boys and men; and are given power by the belief that masculinity is natural and inherent to all males.”⁶ However, for Norse saga literature this variance between conceptions has little traction in part due to the shared culture and historical context of the saga authors. The Norse writers would agree more with the view of inherent masculinity. The Norse pagan perspective viewed men and women as creations of the “sons of Bor” another name for the gods. The stories state that the gods shaped two trees into man and woman named Ask and Embla.⁷ The saga authors also possessed Christian backgrounds, which rely on the scriptures particularly Genesis where God creates man and sends him forth with the expressed purpose of exercising dominion over the earth. These two divergent theories on the origin of masculinity offer a basis for creating broader frameworks for masculinity.

⁴ Brittany Everitt-Penhale and Kopano Ratele, “RETHINKING ‘TRADITIONAL MASCULINITY’ AS CONSTRUCTED, MULTIPLE, AND ≠ HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY,” *South African Review of Sociology* 46, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2015.1025826>.

⁵ Everitt-Penhale and Ratele, 6–7.

⁶ Everitt-Penhale and Ratele, 6–7.

⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda* (Penguin Books Limited, 2005), 18.

Modern Theory

Another point of debate in the discussion on masculinity revolves around the struggle around hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity developed out of, “feminist theories of patriarchy and the related debates over the role of men in transforming patriarchy.”⁸ This theory analyses masculinity from an assumption of male control over women within a society. As Connell and Messerschmidt state, “Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations, or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue”⁹ The authors allow for a fair amount of variance in development of hegemonic masculinity. They argue successfully that, “Thus, hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires.”¹⁰ This fits well enough with the saga presentation of heroic figures that perform actions beyond the abilities of regular men. In addition, these types of masculinity “provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances.”¹¹ This statement rings true from the perspective that saga literature offers examples of problem solving and ways to resolve dispute. The ideal

⁸ Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity,” 831.

⁹ Connell and Messerschmidt, 832.

¹⁰ Connell and Messerschmidt, 838.

¹¹ Connell and Messerschmidt, 838.

masculinity expressed in the sagas serves as excellent models to help resolve day to day issues. The argument also follows that, “Rather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them.”¹² The question then arises does hegemonic masculinity exist within Norse saga literature? The best answer possible is that it is complicated. Men often did occupy a superior social position, which likely indicates the presence of male dominance yet as the sagas themselves show in practice things could be quite different. The Icelandic sagas are full of powerful female figures that exercise dominance over their situations and the men around them. For example, take Thorbjorg a woman from *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*. The saga states, “She was a wise and magnanimous woman. Whenever he husband was away from home, she governed the district and its people, and each and every man was satisfied that his matters were handled well under her charge.”¹³ Here she exercises male authority albeit in the place of her husband. She assumes the role of judge and peacemaker a task often performed by the most powerful male leader in the district. When the local farmers seize the outlaw Grettir she gathers her own male followers and marches out to prevent his execution.¹⁴ The farmers protest but to no avail they state, “Right or wrong you have the power to prevent him from being executed.”¹⁵ This is but one of many examples. In *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* queen Yrsa, upset with her

¹² Connell and Messerschmidt, 846.

¹³ Viðar Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales* (Leifur Eiríksson Pub., 1997), 329.

¹⁴ Hreinsson, 330.

¹⁵ Hreinsson, 330.

husband King Adil's deceitful victory over King Helgi, successfully lobbies for compensation for her father and threatens the king's berserkers.¹⁶ Furthermore, the Valkyrie warrior maidens that exemplifies masculine traits and exercise a great deal of dominance in their affairs. Brynhild the Valkyrie in *The Saga of the Volsungs* stands as an excellent example of this. She is a warrior and a "shield maiden," she shuns marriage until forced into it. As she states, "I struck down Hjalmgunnar in battle, and Odin stabbed me with a sleeping thorn in revenge. He said I should never afterward have victory. He also said that I must marry. And I made a countervow that I would marry no one who knew fear."¹⁷ In this quote, she performs masculine actions such as battle and interacts with Odin in the way of a warrior. Her marriage is not of her choice and she places stipulations on it that prevent her marriage to someone weak. These examples show that masculine hegemony often existed in the background, if at all. Certainly, the sagas do often emphasize male action and the importance of men in society, however to label Norse masculinity as presented through the sagas as simply another type of hegemonic masculinity distorts the complex narrative of the sagas.¹⁸ Although modern conceptual perspectives help us to categorize the nuances visible in the sagas in the end, it is the medieval perspective that offers the most useful analysis.

Norse perspectives

¹⁶ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Penguin Books Limited, 1998), 24–25.

¹⁷ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 67.

¹⁸ The term "traditional masculinity" also appears in a number of studies often used to refer to the type of masculinity stemming from tradition in contrast to dominate or hegemonic masculinity however since the sagas are the source for much of Norse "traditional masculinity" the difference will not be addressed here.

When evaluating Norse masculinity, it is important to remember the role played by warrior culture and identity in Norse masculinity. All of the major male characters of the sagas possess a connection to a warrior tradition. These individuals often attempt great feats to demonstrate their warrior abilities. To understand the ideal of Norse masculinity one must also understand the underlying connection to warrior identity. In her, article *The role and identity of the warrior: self-reflection and awareness in Old Norse literary and social spaces* Stefka G. Eriksen defines a warrior, "...as an individual who turns to physical or verbal fighting as a means to solve a social or political conflict, which is important for him/her on a personal level."¹⁹ This fits well with the numerous violent and warlike acts performed in the sagas. Often the character, be it an outlaw or a king, uses combat to settle problems and seek repayment. The world of the Icelandic sagas is dangerous and the situations that characters confront regularly require a violent response. Eriksen goes on to state, "All of these different genres portray a warrior who is an individual with personal and inner concerns, as well as various social roles entailing conflict solving."²⁰ Here is an excellent breakdown on many of the male characters in the sagas. They all possess a variety of concerns that coupled with their social status compel them to act to resolve disputes and settle issues. A man's role as a warrior ties directly into his masculinity. As Eriksen states, "Warriorship' becomes then a part of the self, an aspect of the self, possibly representing inner conflicts that are never resolved."²¹

¹⁹ Eriksen Stefka G., "The Role and Identity of the Warrior: Self Reflection and Awareness in Old Norse Literary and Social Spaces," n.d., 4.

²⁰ Eriksen Stefka G., 4.

²¹ Eriksen Stefka G., 11.

Although this ‘Warriorship’ may manifest itself in different ways depending on the characters social status and obligations, it still binds firmly to their identity as men.

The Norse poets also offer their own language for discussing ideal masculinity. *Skaldskaparmál*, Snorri Sturluson’s handbook of poetic diction, teaches how to refer to various objects, events, and characters when composing Norse poetry. For example, when discussing men Snorri states, “He should be referred to in terms of his work, what he supplies or receives or does. He can also be referred in terms of his possessions, both those he owns and those he gives away. Likewise in terms of the families he is descended from and those who are descended from him.” This statement reveals that a man’s identity is closely bond up in his work, possessions, and relations. It mentions several key features of ideal masculinity for example the ownership of wealth and generosity. The importance of his ancestors also plays a role particularly if they are noteworthy or famous. There exists a sense that their blood carries certain strength and value. In addition, Snorri writes, “It is done by calling him the performer or advancer of his journeys, doings, fights, voyages, hunting expeditions, weapons, or ships. Thus, he is the prover [*reynir*] of weapons and the marker of war...”²² Here a man’s masculinity is closely associated with his actions. For the Icelandic poets demonstrating masculinity revolved around action. All of the traits of ideal masculinity that the sagas present have at their core specific deeds and tasks. Such as raiding for wealth or demonstrating courage in battle through a bold and violent attack. The Norse poets separate what they view as

²² Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 113.

male tasks from female tasks perhaps showing a bit of hegemonic masculinity. In *Krákumál*, a war poem about Ragnar Lodbrok, the author states speaking of battle,

“It was not like women

bringing wine, at Vikaskeid:

Ægir’s donkey dripped blood

in the din of spears, no little;

Skogul’s cape was scoured in the Skjoldings fury.”²³

Here the task of serving wine, a women’s job, stands separate from the man’s task of battle. This particular piece is interesting because the poet mentions a Valkyrie, Skogul, pointing to the presence of warrior women if only as mythological figures. The poets also emphasized the importance of masculinity from an early age. As the poet states in *Krákumál*,

“We struck with our swords!

I say it’s right for a lad

to dare dash at foemen

as long as they draw swords together.

Let thane not shrink from thane-

that long was the warrior’s way;

²³ Ben Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* (New Haven, Connecticut: The Troth, 2009), 81.

maids' darlings should be dauntless

in the din of swords, always."²⁴

Here the poet glorifies young men engaging in battle and combat. A young man learned to exhibit masculine traits from their adolescence. As Egil states in his poem of morning for his son,

“Myself I know

that in my son

grew the makings

of a worthy man,

had the shield tree

reached manhood,

then earned the claim

of war's arms."²⁵

His son's progress as a man ties to his actions especially those undertaken in times of war. He has confidence that his son started out right on the path towards manhood. In *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, the father Ketil spurs his son on by bemoaning his son's lack of willingness to engage in daring acts that would bring fame and prove his masculinity. He states, “I believe that the old warrior's ways are unknown to you – I wish

²⁴ Waggoner, 82.

²⁵ *Egil's Saga* (Penguin, 1976), 173.

that I could teach them to you. You have now reached the age when it would be right for you to put yourself to the test, and find out what fate has in store for you.”²⁶ As this quote indicates, masculinity often stemmed from the teachings passed on by an older father figure. The sagas are full of father and foster fathers instilling the values of manhood in their sons; examples include Sigurd and his foster father Regin,²⁷ Ragnar Lodebrok and his sons,²⁸ and even King Magnús Barelegs, who mimics the deeds of his grandfather Harald Hardradi²⁹. As evidenced from the passing down of masculine warrior identity masculinity is a process undertaken in community. The warriors of the sagas form bonds with other men strengthening their own reputation. The primary example of this comes from *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, which focuses on two violent troublemakers, Thorgeir and Thormod, who swear an oath binding themselves together. The saga states, “It had been a tradition of men of renown to become bound to each other by a law which stated that whoever outlived the other would undertake to avenge his death.”³⁰ Another important example is the formation of *lið* or Viking war bands. Usually, “an independent ship-borne host or troop” or a, “retinue of warriors sworn to a leader” these groups form the basic building blocks of Viking warrior society.³¹ These groups appear throughout the

²⁶ *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, World of the Sagas (New York: Viking, 2000), 190.

²⁷ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 56.

²⁸ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 30.

²⁹ Snorri and Lee M. Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin, Tex: Univ. of Texas Press, 1995), 674.

³⁰ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 331.

³¹ Ben Raffield et al., “Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands,” *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (March 2016): 35–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.1100548>.

sagas. From Hrolf Kraki's warriors³² to the men of Vatnsdal³³ to the Varangian guard, these groups bring warriors together for a common purpose and offer unique opportunities for mutual support and the gathering of wealth. In other words joining other men offers the chance to perform the actions that reinforce one's own masculinity. Norse masculinity centers on the deeds performed. The major traits of ideal masculinity stem from a set of actions or behaviors that emphasize the subject's masculinity. It is something men should exhibit from an early age and something often received from their father figures. In addition, masculinity is a communal experience undertaken in community with other warriors and men.

With this basis of modern theory on gender/masculinity and the Norse perspective on the origins of masculinity, this thesis will embark on an analysis of ideal masculinity as presented in the Icelandic sagas. The sagas with their rich cultural background and complex narratives offer a number of excellent opportunities for the evaluation of Norse or 'Viking' masculinity. Each saga genre—Legendary Sagas, Family Sagas, and Kings' Sagas—possess their own unique take on ideal masculinity. Each chapter will analyze specific traits of ideal masculinity as represented in three selected sagas from one of the three genres. Through an examination of the presence of various traits of ideal masculinity in these sagas, a broader picture of Norse ideal masculinity begins to emerge. In order to construct this broader picture of Norse masculinity it is important to examine examples from all three genres. This allows for insight into ideal masculinity from across the social scale. Differences exist between kings, legendary heroes, and farmers and by

³² Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*.

³³ *The Sagas of Icelanders*.

studying the unique aspects of masculinity in each area of the social system a broader more holistic perspective emerges.

LEGENDARY MASCULINITY

Filled with epic battles and daring feats the mythic/legendary sagas evoke something larger than life. While these sagas do reflect historical events and characters, the focus is not on historical accuracy. Instead, they present larger than life heroes faced with great challenges and inescapable dilemmas. For the heroes of the mythic/legendary sagas the traits that make a man also make a great hero. These heroes possess warrior prowess, courage, wisdom, honor, and the wealth that mark them as a hero. These five attributes help define how the Norse writers view masculinity within the mythic sagas. Warrior prowess focuses on a man's skill in combat and reliance on warfare as a means to resolve conflict. Courage centers on bravery in battle. Wisdom emphasizes special knowledge and cunning. Honor relates to how a man fulfills his obligations. Finally, wealth deals with the acquisition of special items and the judicious use of wealth. The heroes found in *The Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, and *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* all in various ways possess these masculine attributes. In studying these heroes, it is important to remember that they exist within the Norse religious and mythic framework. The influence of spiritual element such as Odin and Valhalla shape these narratives. The driving ideologies of these early Viking heroes spring in part from their religious beliefs and traditions. The heroes of these sagas are complex characters with flaws and often an overabundance of some of these traits.

Warrior Prowess

Warrior prowess holds great importance to the characters of the legendary sagas. When studying warrior prowess it is essential to look at the religious elements involved, the role it plays in defining one's masculinity, and its connection to these men from an early age. One of the first examples of a warrior hero occurs with the description of Volsung, the legendary ancestor of the Volsungs. The author describes Volsung at his birth: "He was soon big, strong, and daring in what were thought to be tests of manhood and prowess. He became the greatest of warriors and was victorious in the battles he fought on his expeditions."³⁴ Here the author emphasizes the warrior identity of Volsung. The victories that Volsung achieves confirm his masculinity and legendary status. In addition, Volsung's connection underpins this statement. By commenting on Volsung's victorious nature, he draws on a religious element. As translator Jessie L. Byock states, "The element *sig* (victory) which appears in proper names in the Volsung family, may emphasize the special relationship that existed between the Volsungs and Odin, who was also called *Sigtýr*, victory god."³⁵ At various points throughout this saga, Odin appears to change seemingly impossible situations. The large role played by divine figures and religious elements illustrate the interweaving of the spiritual with the legendary sagas version of masculinity.

A man's status as a warrior was of great importance to the characters of these sagas. The description of Ragnar illustrates this. *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok and his Sons* states, "He was grown to great size, handsome in appearance and keen in understanding,

³⁴ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 37.

³⁵ Byock, 111.

generous to his men and fierce to his enemies. As soon as he was old enough, he got himself some men and a warship and became the greatest warrior, so that hardly anybody was a match for him.”³⁶ Ragnar appears as a leader and a powerful warrior with defining physical traits and a group of followers. He then proves himself through the slaying of the serpent and his marriage to Thora.³⁷ Ragnar’s warrior prowess receives further emphasized in the story of his final battle. The saga states, “He broke through the ranks that day, and whenever he went, the host fell back before him. He broke through the ranks that day, and whenever he hewed or struck shields, mail or helms, his blows were so strong that no one withstood him.”³⁸ Here Ragnar acts as a great warrior should driving back the enemy and fighting hard until the end. Interestingly Ragnar also exhibits some aspects of berserker rage in this story. Such as fighting without care for personal injury and striving against greater numbers. This emphasizes the Norse ideal of victory as something worth sacrifice. As Ragnar’s wife Aslaug states, “You realize you cannot be called the greatest of men if you don’t strive for it.”³⁹ A man’s warrior status also indicated a level of skill in the arts of warfare. For example, when Ivar the Boneless and his brothers besieged the town of Vifilsborg Ivar develops a plan. The saga states, “When it becomes dark, we shall leave our tents and go into the forest, in secret... When we come into the woods, every man shall tie up a bundle of sticks for himself. When that is done, we shall surround the town on all sides and set the wood on fire. A Huge fire will be made, and their town walls will lose their mortar from the fire. We shall then bring up

³⁶ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 5.

³⁷ Waggoner, 6–7.

³⁸ Waggoner, 30.

³⁹ Waggoner, 22.

catapults and test how hardy the walls are.”⁴⁰ This quote illustrates that these warriors did not always attack blindly. An effective warrior would use some level of stratagem to accomplish his objective. *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok and his Sons* reveals the importance of warrior identity to a greater degree than *The Saga of the Volsungs*. While Sigurd and his ancestors are warriors, the focus of their sagas centers more on the conflicting obligations that arise. While for Ragnar and his sons, war appears as their primary occupation. Conquest and battle are more common in this saga and much of the conflict centers on foreign human enemies as opposed to mythical creatures or members of one’s own family.

The characters of this saga are almost all warriors. They exist as a part of vibrant warrior culture instilled in them from an early age. By the time, they reached manhood they were formidable warriors. For example, the saga states, “When Agnar, Hroar’s son, was twenty years old, men thought they had never seen any man his equal. He was foremost in all accomplishments and he became a great warrior. He became so famous that, when old tales are told, he is widely held to be the greatest of champions past or present.”⁴¹ Here he achieves legendary status at an early age. Other warriors also develop skills from early on. The son of Bjorn also become warriors at an early age, “The boys shot up like weeds. When they were at the games with other men, they were fierce and unyielding in everything.”⁴² These quotes demonstrate that these warriors proved themselves through contests and battles. This focus on testing warriors is firmly rooted within the saga. The

⁴⁰ Waggoner, 26.

⁴¹ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 19.

⁴² Byock, 40.

queen Yrsa when after she develops a grudge against Adils berserkers states, “I plan to put your berserkers to death as soon as I can, that is, if I find someone manly enough to do so, both for my sake and as proof of his own worth.”⁴³ The characters in this saga demonstrate their warrior skills through contest.

Courage

The heroes of this saga also demonstrate the importance of courage in Norse concepts of masculinity. When warned by his daughter about his impending death at the hands of his son-in-law King Siggeir Volsung states,

“All peoples will bear witness that unborn I spoke one word and made a vow that I would flee neither fire nor iron from fear, and so I have done until now. Why should I not fulfill that vow in my old age? Maidens will not taunt my sons during games by saying that they feared their deaths, for each man must at one time die.”⁴⁴

Here several themes are at work. Volsung rejects the idea that he would hide for fear of death. To Volsung courage is an essential part of masculine identity. He further hints at this when he states that maidens will not be the ones to criticize his sons. He possesses a fatalistic outlook towards death that other heroes such as Ragnar Lodbrok will echo. His descendant Sigurd also mentions the role that courage and fearlessness play in the life of a Norse warrior. He states, “When men come to battle, a fearless heart serves a man better than a sharp sword.”⁴⁵ Sigurd sees courage as a weapon to use when in battle.

⁴³ Byock, 25.

⁴⁴ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 40.

⁴⁵ Byock, 65.

Sigurd also echoes the fatalistic language present at the end of Volsungs speech. For example, in response to Brynhild the female warrior Sigurd states, “I will not flee, though Death-fated you know I am, I was not conceived a coward. I will have all of your loving advice as long as I live.”⁴⁶ These heroes also share the idea that they from the very beginning of their lives rejected fear and cowardice. This fearlessness extends to their deaths. At the end of the saga, King Atli tortures Hogni and Gunnar in order to ferret out where they are hiding the treasure that Sigurd took when he slayed the Dragon. After failing to convince Gunnar that the heart of a thrall could be Hogni’s, the king cuts out the heart of Hogni. The saga recounts, “Hogni’s strength was so immense that he laughed while he suffered this torture. Everyone wondered at his courage and it has been remembered ever since.”⁴⁷ His courage and willingness to prioritize his masculinity over his own life result in fame and recognition. His brother Gunnar states, “Here now can be seen the heart of Hogni the valiant; it is unlike the heart of Hjalli the cowardly cause it stirs little.”⁴⁸ Once again, the bravery of Hogni takes center stage. His courage is so great that even when removed his heart trembles only a little. The saga also describes Gunnar in terms of courage, “And there, with much valor, Gunnar lost his life.”⁴⁹ To these heroes courage defines them. It is one of the central traits of their masculinity. However, as positive as courage and fearlessness may be there is a darker side to this masculine attribute. When Sigmund and Sinfjotli don the wolf skins during their time in the forest,

⁴⁶ Byock, 70–1.

⁴⁷ Byock, 102.

⁴⁸ Byock, 102–3.

⁴⁹ Byock, 103.

they run wild. The sagas state, “And the weird power was there as before: they howled like wolves, both understanding the sounds.”⁵⁰ Their animal nature leads them into trouble when they begin to attack men and Sinfjotli take on more than he can handle. When Sigmund rebukes him for this he states, “You accepted help to kill seven men. I am a child in age next to you, but I did not ask for help in killing eleven men.”⁵¹ The animal nature of their transformation makes them fearless to an excessive degree and a nearly gets Sinfjotli killed. In contrast to masculine courage, animalistic violence stems from out of control behavior. The individual experiences loss of control and as a result goes beyond courage in the face of danger and into pure violence and rage. Although they may appear similar, courage and mindless animal rage differ due to the loss of control. The absence of animal like rage does not indicate a lack of courage. Even though he never descends into animalistic behavior Sigurd is described by stating, “He did not lack in courage and he never knew fear.”⁵² It was important that a warrior demonstrate these attributes in order to prove his masculinity. When Ivar and his brothers set siege to Vifilsborg the townspeople refuse to surrender, instead they lay down a challenge stating, “You must be first be tested, and show us your valor and eagerness.”⁵³ Insult or actions against ones family could provoke a violent reaction. Upon hearing the news of their father’s death, the sons of Ragnar react violently, “Bjorn shook the spearpoint apart, so that it split into two pieces. Hvitserk gripped a game piece so hard that blood spurted out

⁵⁰ Byock, 44.

⁵¹ Byock, 45.

⁵² Byock, 73.

⁵³ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 26.

from every nail.”⁵⁴ Their younger brother Sigurd Snake-in-the-Eye cut himself to the bone. Their brother Ivar is the one that hints at revenge to come. The saga states, “But Ivar asked for every last detail, and his complexion turned red for a while, then black for a while, and periodically went pale. He was so enraged that his skin was all swollen from the savagery in his breast.”⁵⁵ Interestingly, it is Ivar who cations his brother to wait. Their reactions illustrate how failure to respond to insult could lead to accusations of cowardice. When Ivar proposes to wait and accept money they react negatively, “But when his brother heard that, they became angry and said that they should never be such cowards, even if he wanted it so.”⁵⁶ His brother argues, “Many will say that we have wrongly given our allegiance if we fail to avenge out father, though we have gone raiding far from home and killed many innocent men.”⁵⁷ Their remarks illustrate a clear concern for how others perceive them. They still fear accusations of cowardice even given their fearsome reputations. The bravery and courage to do great acts was important to the warrior’s masculinity. For example, Ivar the Boneless upon hearing of his half-brothers murder states, “You boast of boundless bravery and daring. Now what you all need is great tenacity as well. I’ll be hoisted above heroes, because I have no bones, yet I’ll have a hand in vengeance, whichever I make use of.”⁵⁸ Even given his disabled state, he considers himself bound to take part in the quest for revenge. The saga writers connect bravery with the will to carry out the boasts of the warrior. The intense focus on courage

⁵⁴ Waggoner, 32.

⁵⁵ Waggoner, 32.

⁵⁶ Waggoner, 21.

⁵⁷ Waggoner, 33.

⁵⁸ Waggoner, 67.

leads to a fatalistic attitude. In the *Krákumál* a poem centered on war and combat the hero Lodbrok exclaims,

“I desire my death now.

The disir call me home,

whom Herjan hastens onward

from his high hall, to take me.

On the high bench, boldly,

beer I'll drink with the Gods;

hope of life is lost now-

laughing I shall die!”⁵⁹

This fatalistic language has many similarities to the statements of Sigurd. Ragnar and Sigurd's perspective originates in part from Norse religion. One predominate belief centered on Valhalla a place where those slain in battle go to be with Odin. In the quote above the hero tells how disir or female spirits and Herjan another name for Odin call him to this hall. There he will drink and celebrate similar to the description of the Valkyries and the hall of Odin in *The Prose Edda*. The importance of their personal reputations and their religious beliefs in an afterlife full of celebration reinforced the masculine ideals of courage and bravery in battle.

⁵⁹ Waggoner, 83. This Lodbrok is identified with Ragnar and his story shares many of the details from *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok and Sons*.

The warriors of this saga demonstrate their courage through action and contest. Sviþdag's father presents the ideal version of this ethos in his advice to his son. He states, "Do not envy others and avoid arrogance, for such conduct diminishes one's fame. Defend yourself if you are attacked. It is becoming to be humble, yet at the same time you must make a bold showing if put to the test."⁶⁰ His father advises humility unless tested. Arrogant warriors go looking for trouble and end up losing status. Sviþdag apparently takes his father's advice with a grain of salt. His demeanor upon reaching Adils's fortress shows boldness and even arrogance. The king remarks, "I think he is no weakling, still it seems to me a good idea to test him to see whether he is as much a man as he thinks he is."⁶¹ Although Sviþdag comes across as arrogant, he has the skills to prove it he rises to the challenge with boldness. The saga states, "The next morning a fierce single combat took place. The blows struck were powerful, and everyone realized that the newcomer's sword cut with great strength. As the first berserker fell back before the newcomer, Sviþdag killed him."⁶² This saga also focuses on the drinking of blood as a way to gain courage and strength. For example, Elk-Frodi demands that his brother Bodavr drink his blood to gain strength. He states, "From now on, you will be ahead of most men in strength and prowess as well as in courage and nobility."⁶³ The weakling Hott also drinks beast blood and becomes strong, "Bodvar said, 'Now your will drink the beast's blood.' For a while, Hott was unwilling, although certainly he dared do nothing else. Bodvar made him drink two large mouthfuls as well as eat some of the beast's heart.

⁶⁰ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 26.

⁶¹ Byock, 27.

⁶² Byock, 27.

⁶³ Byock, 46.

After that Bodvar seized Hott, and they fought each other for a long time.”⁶⁴ This has numerous parallels to Sigurd’s actions in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. For these warriors blood contains magical powers and can strengthen a warrior and give him new skills. Blood here represents one’s life force the shedding of blood was often a part of sacrifices and many kennings use blood imagery. To give blood represents the passing on of strength and vitality. Like many other early warrior cultures the Norse believe that consuming blood can confer strength. Through contest or blood, the characters of this saga demonstrate and develop their courage and ferocity.

Wisdom

The male heroic characters in *The Saga of the Volsungs* also considered wisdom and the ability to foretell the future as an important characteristic of a masculine warrior. Odin the All-Father had a deep connection with wisdom. Snorri Sturluson in *The Prose Edda* recounts the story of how Odin gained wisdom. He writes,

“Wisdom and intelligence are hidden there, and Mimir is the name of the wells owner. He is full of wisdom because he drinks of the well from the Gjallarhorn. All-Father went there and asked for one drink from the well, but he did not get this until he gave one of his eyes as a pledge.”⁶⁵

Odin often appears throughout *The Saga of the Volsungs* to aide heroes and dispense wisdom. For example, he appears to Sigurd before the slaying of the dragon Fafnir

⁶⁴ Byock, 51.

⁶⁵ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 14–15.

advising him to dig many trenches to drain the dragon blood.⁶⁶ As the story of Odin's eyes also indicates wisdom, had value, and was worth sacrifice. The heroes often go through trials to obtain wisdom. Sigurd gains wisdom through slaying Fafnir and eating his heart. At first intending to cook it for Regin, Sigurd tastes the blood and then hears the birds, "There sits, Sigurd, roasting Fafnir's heart. Better he should eat it himself," said a bird. "Then he would be wiser than any man."⁶⁷ He then must travel to find Brynhild who can grant him further wisdom.⁶⁸ When he awakens Brynhild she agrees to share her wisdom, stating, "Let us drink together and may the gods grant us a fair day, that you may gain profit and renown from my wisdom, and that you will later remember what we speak of."⁶⁹ As Brynhild states wisdom could lead to success. Brynhild's wisdom came in the form of special runes. She states,

"Victory runes shall you know

If you want to secure wisdom,

And cut them on the sword hilt,

On the center of the blade,

And parts of the band,

And name Tyr twice."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 63.

⁶⁷ Byock, 66.

⁶⁸ Byock, 66.

⁶⁹ Byock, 67.

⁷⁰ Byock, 68.

These runes granted victory while others could aid one in decision-making. She goes on to state,

“Mind runes shall you learn

If you would be

Wiser than all men.

They were solved,

They were carved out,

They were heeded by Hropt.”⁷¹

This quote again contains a reference to Odin. These runes gave advantage to those who understood them. Wisdom also allowed one to react properly and to conduct oneself well in the presence of others. Sigurd as the hero of the saga also possessed this type of wisdom. The saga states, “Sigurd had also learned many courtesies during his youth. He was a wise man, knowing events before they happened, and he understood the language of birds. Because of these abilities, little took him by surprise.”⁷² This quote also hints that wisdom gave one the ability to tell what would happen and to understand the mysteries of the world. Fafnir the dragon possesses this type of wisdom. He predicts Sigurd’s death as the result of the treasure and explains mysteries of the Norns and gods.⁷³ A wise hero could also conduct himself well and convince others to follow him.

⁷¹ Byock, 69.

⁷² Byock, 72.

⁷³ Byock, 64.

For example the description of Sigurd, “He could speak at length, and with such eloquence, that when he took it upon himself to press the matter, everybody agreed even before he was finished speaking that no course other than the one he advocated was possible.”⁷⁴ Eloquence was an important feature for a hero particularly when convincing others to follow you. A wise hero knew secret runes that gave power and victory, could predict the future, understood mysteries of the gods, and could speak well to convince his followers.

Wisdom takes on a different character in *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* like in *The Sagas of the Volsungs* wisdom is connected to runes and special knowledge of the gods. Yet in the *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* wisdom can also mean cunning in battle. The definition of wisdom shifts slightly from *The Saga of the Volsungs* to *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* instead of runes and the prediction of the future the focus is on wit and clever strategies. For Ragnar and his fellow warriors wisdom focuses on cunning and the development of clever strategies. The wisest warriors in this saga are extremely crafty at their best. For example, Ragnar wins his bride through clever means. The writer recounts, “He had some clothes made for himself, with a strange appearance; they were shaggy breeches and a shaggy cape, and once they were made, he had them boiled in tar.”⁷⁵ This protected him from the serpent’s poisonous blood. He then left his spearhead in the wound so that he could later claim his reward.⁷⁶ As crafty as Ragnar is, his son Ivar the Boneless surpasses him. He outwits many of his enemies and constantly changes

⁷⁴ Byock, 72–3.

⁷⁵ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 5.

⁷⁶ Waggoner, 6–7.

strategies to adapt to situations his most effective and clever scheme centers on outwitting King Ælle. Instead of seeking vengeance right away and walking into a trap, Ivar decides to accept the king's compensation. He tricks the king into giving him large amounts of land in his kingdom then Ivar executes his greatest move. The saga states, "...he gave all his money to the most important men in the land, and so he lured away King Ælle's fighting men: they all swore that they would stay at home peacefully, even if Ælle might go to war later."⁷⁷ This tactic works so well that Ivar and his brothers are able to defeat the king.⁷⁸ This type of cleverness allows Ivar to become successful and is a hallmark of the characters of *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok and His Sons*. Other characters like those in the *Sögubrot* also deploy clever formations and tricks. King Harald Wartooth states, "Who could have taught Hiring how to from the Boar's head formation? I thought no one knew that except me and Odin - or does Odin wish to deny me the gift of victory?"⁷⁹ This character also possesses a clever strategy yet he attributes it to Odin. Wisdom served an important role in the legendary sagas wise and craft warriors knew special runes and stratagems and gained victory through their insight

Honor

The ideal of honor also held great significance for these warriors. Loss of honor stems from rejecting or failing to act in a way deemed satisfactory by those around you. However, for these legendary figures the concept of honor fundamentally connected to

⁷⁷ Waggoner, 35.

⁷⁸ Waggoner, 36.

⁷⁹ Waggoner, 54.

the importance of fulfilling ones vows and obligations⁸⁰ something with which the characters of *The Saga of the Volsungs* often struggle. Obligations take on increasing importance when they are to significance individuals or connected to important responsibilities. An electric tension exists inside these characters, as they must choose between violating their obligations to one party or the other. For example, Regin upon the death of his brother, the great serpent Fafnir, states, “You have killed my brother, and I can hardly be considered blameless in this deed.”⁸¹ Even Sigurd, the hero of this saga, wrestles with his obligations. Sworn to marry Brynhild, Grimhild tricks Sigurd with an ale of forgetfulness and marries another. Then he also tricks Brynhild into marrying King Gunnar. When Brynhild confronts him about his trickery and she bitterly states, “It is the most grievous of all sorrows that I cannot bring it about that a sharp blade be reddened with your blood.”⁸² He responds by trying to excuse his actions and to patch the situation, “I love you more than myself, although I was the object of the deceit that cannot be changed...I should like us to enter one bed.”⁸³ However, she will have none of it and in the end; Sigurd’s broken vow will cost him his life. King Gunnar also faces this crisis between two diverging obligations. Gunnar must decide between appeasing his wife and killing Sigurd. Brynhild gives him little choice she states, “You shall lose both power and wealth, life and me, and I shall journey home to my kin and remain there in sorrow unless you kill Sigurd and his son.”⁸⁴ Gunnar is at a loss; the saga states, “He thought he did not

⁸⁰ Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, 26. Interestingly one of the Norns is called Skuld, which is sometimes translated obligation. This further indicates that obligations are connected to the Norse ideas of fate.

⁸¹ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 65.

⁸² Byock, 87.

⁸³ Byock, 87.

⁸⁴ Byock, 88–89.

know the best course to pursue, for he was bound by oath to Sigurd. And various thoughts shifted in his mind, but he thought the worst dishonor would be if his wife left him.”⁸⁵ The loss of his wife would reveal Gunnar as a weakling a man unable to show himself worthy of a woman like Brynhild. Gunnar then plots with his brother Hogni to murder Sigurd. He sells his plan by appealing to his brother’s greed and they task their other brother Guttorm to commit the murder.⁸⁶ Interestingly elements of witchcraft appear when they cook special meat to stir up Guttorm. In addition, they appeal to his sense of honor arguing that the killing of such a great figure could bring him great honor.⁸⁷ However, while open challenge and combat serves as an honorable way to kill an opponent stabbing them in their beds or burning them in their hall in the case of King Frodi lacks honor.⁸⁸ This further demonstrates how important honor was to these warriors and it shows that honors could also come through performing great deeds a concept that connects back to the previously discussed ideals of courage. Upon his death Sigurd feels betrayed although he had broken his vow to Brynhild in regards to Gunnar he remained blameless. He states, “And now it has come to pass as has long been foretold. I refused to believe it, but no one can withstand this fate. Brynhild, who loved me more than she did any other man, caused this betrayal. I will swear this, that I never did a disservice to Gunnar.”⁸⁹ The mess of conflicting oaths has unraveled with disastrous results. Brynhild commits suicide and Gunnar and his brothers die in battle without the help of Sigurd to

⁸⁵ Byock, 89.

⁸⁶ Byock, 89.

⁸⁷ Byock, 90.

⁸⁸ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 11.

⁸⁹ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 90.

strengthen them. To remain honorable through fulfilling ones obligations was no easy task. The actions of the heroes of *The Saga of the Volsungs* place them between two equally unsatisfying alternatives.

The characters in *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok* also hold their honor in high regard like with challenges to their courage they react violently. The female characters of these sagas often use issues of honor to provoke the men to action. When Ragnar's second wife Aslaug hears of the death of her stepsons, she calls on Ragnar's other sons to take vengeance. She states, "Had you been the first to fall, without fail you would not be lying, lacking in vengeance delayed for half a year, If Eirek and Agnar –I'll conceal it little- brethren not born of men, still did breathe and live."⁹⁰ She subtly picks at their honor arguing that if still alive their other brothers would have taken vengeance in the proper time. In order to maintain their honor the brothers must act. Disputes over honor could become serious matters. However sometimes they played a more fun and festive role. At the end of *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok and His Sons* a curious story appears. When two mighty warriors encounter one another at a funeral feast a bragging contest ensues as they each try to prove themselves the better man. The first man states,

“Speak to us of your honor,

let's settle this, I ask you:

have you seen the raven shiver,

sated with blood, on its perch?

⁹⁰ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 21.

More often you sat at feasts,
sprawled upon the high-seat,
than you carved bloody carrion
for corpse-birds in the valley.”⁹¹

This warrior makes a clear connection between prowess in battle and honor. An honorable warrior fights instead of remaining in the hall in safety. The warrior receives honor through his actions. The honor he acquires increases his standing as a warrior. This accusation done using several cool kennings also argues that the other man is all talk and no action. Found at feasts instead of one the battlefield fighting for honor. The second man responds with equal vitriol,

“Be silent, you sluggard!
Shabby wretch, what have you done?
You have dared no deeds that
outdo my own glory;
you didn’t sate the sun-seeker,
the bitch, at the sword’s game;
you refused to give gore
to the giantess’s steed.”⁹²

⁹¹ Waggoner, 38.

⁹² Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 38.

His response accuses the other warrior of fear and an unwillingness to win honor on the battlefield. Fortunately, the warriors recognize one another as they had both fought for Ragnar in his battles with the Bulgars. These quotes serve as a great example of how much these warriors valued honor. In pursuing vengeance and in bragging contests these warriors went to great lengths to demonstrate their honor and status. For them honor functioned inside a system of reciprocity. For example, feeling slighted the mother of Jarl Hrok states, “We supported them when they were taking vengeance for our father, yet they have not rewarded us for our help either in respect to your father or in respect to me.”⁹³ The honorable thing to do was to fulfill your obligations particularly in regards to support on the battlefield.

Wealth

Wealth serves as the final attribute of a hero as emphasized in *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Much of the conflict in this saga centers on treasure and movable goods. A victorious warrior should look the part with the best weapons and gear. The descriptions of these legendary figures indicate how the right equipment could enhance an individual’s reputation. For example the description of Sigmund’s son, “Sinfjotli stood up, his helmet shining like glass on his head, his coat of mail white as snow, his spear in his hand adorned with a magnificent banner, and his shield rimmed with gold before him. This man knew how to speak to kings.”⁹⁴ His equipment gives him an aura of success.

⁹³ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 16.

⁹⁴ Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs*, 49.

The saga also includes a similar description of Sigurd, “I think one of the gods is coming here. This man is all equipped in gold. His horse is far larger than others and his weaponry is exceptionally fine. He is far above other men, and he himself surpasses other men.”⁹⁵ Sigurd’s equipment enhances his reputation and makes him an object of admiration. A special piece of gear especially one given by the gods could further enhance a warriors status. Early in the saga Odin appears in the hall of King Volsung there, he plants a sword in the tree Barnstock stating, “He who draws this sword out of the trunk shall receive it from me as a gift, and he himself shall prove that he has never carried a better sword than this one.”⁹⁶ Sigmund the one to draw this sword goes on to be one of the early heroes of the saga. Sigurd later comes into possession of this sword and his foster father Regin rebuilds it into a weapon that can split anvils.⁹⁷ Sigurd also receives a special horse from Odin.⁹⁸ Even the dragon Fafnir possesses a special piece of equipment a special helm. He states, “Have you not heard that all people are afraid of me and my helm or terror?”⁹⁹ The lack of wealth could be a point of insecurity. Regin tells Sigurd, “You have too little wealth...But I can tell you where there is great wealth to be had. And it is likely that there would be honor in seeking it and glory should you acquire it.”¹⁰⁰ As a result, these warriors often went to great lengths to acquire wealth. However,

⁹⁵ Byock, 78.

⁹⁶ Byock, 38.

⁹⁷ Byock, 60.

⁹⁸ Byock, 56.

⁹⁹ Byock, 64.

¹⁰⁰ Byock, 56.

it often ended badly. For example, Fafnir murdered his father and warped by the treasure became an, “evil serpent”¹⁰¹. He predicts this same downfall of Sigurd stating, “You will ride there, where you will find so much gold that it will be plentiful for the rest of your days. And that same gold will be your death, as it will be the death of all who possess it.”¹⁰² This comes true when Gunnar murders Sigurd in part for his treasure stating, “We will then also control the gold and have all the power.”¹⁰³ In turn, King Atli kills Gunnar and his brother Hogni for this same treasure.¹⁰⁴ Wealth and movable goods had great importance for these heroes. However, this treasure could become a double-edged sword bringing death to the greedy. The important factor revolves around how one uses wealth giving wealth benefits others and brings in willing followers. A true hero is generous towards those around him particularly those fighting alongside him.

The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok also shift the definition of wealth. The heroic characters in these sagas demonstrate their wealth through their generosity. A generous warrior raises his status and gains new followers. Ragnar on preparing for his attack on England states this verse to his wife Randalin,

“Let no man spare the Rhine’s amber

if he wants seasoned warriors;

it’s harmful for the helm-wise

¹⁰¹ Byock, 59.

¹⁰² Byock, 65.

¹⁰³ Byock, 89.

¹⁰⁴ Byock, 96.

to hoard rings, rather than troops.
It's hard to defend the fortress-gates
with flame-red gold treasures;
many kings have lost their lives,
though their riches live on after."¹⁰⁵

Ragnar wisely understands that treasure is worthless if not used. Gold does a king little good sitting in a fortress or hiding place. By compensating his warriors generosity Ragnar raises more troops and avoids a bad reputation. Other characters also follow this same course. When Ivar is plotting his vengeance against King Aelle he gives generously to both found his town and to draw the king's supporters away. The saga states, "Now that he had his town built, he gave away treasure, and he was so generous that he gave with both hands."¹⁰⁶ His generosity works to his benefit. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* is especially concerned with generosity. When Hroar and Helgi complete their vengeance on King Frodi they take, time to reward their supporters, "To many they gave rich gifts. They took the kingdom, including all of King Frodi's wealth, his lands and his movable property."¹⁰⁷ King Hrolf as the primary hero of this saga exemplifies this trait. The saga states, "I have heard that King Hrolf is open-handed and generous and so trustworthy and particular about his friends that his equal cannot be found. He withholds neither gold nor

¹⁰⁵ Waggoner, *The sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Waggoner, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 10.

treasure from nearly everyone who wants or needs them.”¹⁰⁸ His generosity makes him worthy of note and raises his status as a king. As this next quote illustrates this also meant getting the best followers, “With the large force he had assembled, Hrolf succeeded in making all the kings he fought pay tribute to him. Like with honor wealth functions within a system of reciprocity the king receives tribute and in turn protects the territories he controls. A deciding factor was that all the best warriors wanted to be in his following. They chose to serve Hrolf, because he was far more generous with rewards than any other kings.”¹⁰⁹ Their decision to serve Hrolf stems from his generosity. These warriors also showed off their wealth with fine equipment. Even queens dressed this way. For example Queen Olof, “Like a warrior king, she dressed in a coat of mail, carried a sword and shield, and wore a helmet.”¹¹⁰ Her way of dressing make her masculine traits stand out. These warriors use wealth as a way of recruiting followers and emphasizing their masculinity. By carrying special weapons and gear, they emphasize their victories and ability as warriors. Successful leaders then turn around and give out their wealth generously to their followers. Rewarding them for their service and ensuring future loyalty.

The men of the legendary sagas possess their own unique take on masculinity. In keeping with their legendary status, their actions are grand and dynamic. The five different traits presented all provide a different lens with which to examine legendary masculinity. These heroes use their warrior prowess, courage, and wisdom to accomplish

¹⁰⁸ Byock, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Byock, 33.

¹¹⁰ Byock, 11.

their great feats of skill. However, it is their honor and use of wealth that allows them to fulfill their lasting obligations and to cement their reputations.

OUTLAWS AND CHIEFTAINS

The Icelandic family sagas follow the adventures of the many of the founding settlers of Iceland and their descendants. The perception of masculinity in these sagas contains many similarities to that of the Legendary Sagas. However, these sagas focus more attention on an individual's position within Icelandic and broader Norse society. The majority of the central characters in these sagas represent the extremes of Icelandic society from outlaws to the leading heads of families. The ideal perception of masculinity in these sagas centers on four traits: warrior prowess, courage, great deeds, and wealth. This chapter will focus on three specific family sagas *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, *Grettir's Saga*, and *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*. These sagas each contain characters that represent these masculine ideals in a variety of ways. Despite how their societal status affects their behavior these men, all have roots in the same warrior tradition. As a result, they measure themselves against a shared set of masculine ideals.

Warrior Prowess

One of the most important features of ideal Norse masculinity is warrior prowess. For the men of the family sagas one's status and ability as a warrior had great significance. This section will explore the importance of warrior prowess to the characters of these sagas. Traveling and going raiding served as ways to prove yourself and to exhibit your martial prowess. Skill with arms and the ability to stand up to great men in a fight took on great importance. A man's societal standing directly tied to his ability to prove himself in battle. For example the opening description of Thorgeir a trouble-making outlaw from

The Saga of the Sworn Brothers focuses on his ability as a warrior, "...who developed early into a large and powerful man with a fighting temperament. He earned at a young age to defend himself with a shield, and was skilled in the use of arms."¹¹¹ Everything from his size to his abilities from a young age set him up to be a great warrior. The description reveals the importance of warrior ability to Thorgeir's identity. His sworn brother Thormond also shares this emphasis on warrior prowess. Their outlook on life reflects this focus on warrior identity as a way to gain fame and wealth. The saga states, "Both also felt early on – and it later turned out to be true – that they would die fighting, since neither was the kind to back off from or give in to anyone he came up against. They were more concerned with success in this life than glory in the life to come. They thus swore that whoever survived the other would avenge his death."¹¹² This quote reflects the importance of armed confrontation and warrior status for young men seeking to become successful. Even experienced warriors feared the consequences of losing their warrior abilities. Upon losing his leg in a battle Onund a warrior from *Grettir's Saga* states,

“the day we faced the music
of sword blades clanging on shields
destroyed my life's joy:
hardships griped us too soon.
The axe hexed me with a maiming stroke.

¹¹¹ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 330. *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*

¹¹² Hreinsson, 331.

Who now would pick me as a man of consequence?”¹¹³

The first major action of a saga establishes the main characters martial prowess.

Thorgeir’s opening actions in *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* illustrates this. When Jod slays Thorgeir’s father Havar over the use of a horse Thorgeir retaliates. He travels to Jod’s home and demands compensation. Jod responds by refusing to pay proper compensation to Thorgeir for his father’s death. Thorgeir then runs him through with a spear.¹¹⁴ What is most interesting about this incident is the secret identity given by Thorgeir to the servant when he opens the door. He chooses the name. “Vigfus” or, “eager to kill”¹¹⁵ a name Thormod will also use to conceal his identity after slaying Thorgrim one of the warriors who kills Thorgeir.¹¹⁶ His choice indicates Thorgeir’s mentality. His eagerness to kill appears as an extension of his warrior prowess. For example, when outlawed to Greenland Thromod seeks revenge and kills several men. He boasts on this achievement in these verses to King Olaf, “A great mark I have branded

on the dwellers of Greenland,

brought harm to the sea-king’s hail makers,

those who had me outlawed.

That mark will be slow

to fade from the backs

¹¹³ *Grettir’s Saga* (OUP Oxford, 2009), 13.

¹¹⁴ *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, 333-334.

¹¹⁵ *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, 333.

¹¹⁶ *The Sagas of the Sworn Brothers*, 378.

of those warlike sword-wielders

unless they do me to death.”¹¹⁷

Here he boosts his reputation by mentioning the warrior abilities of his enemies. The sagas often use verses celebrating battle, raiding, and warrior identity like this one to commemorate great warriors. For example, Thorgeir gets into a fight over a horse and slays two men of standing as a result Thormod composes this verse;

“Fate favored the warrior

when the swords rained down:

Mar’s son paid for his pride,

ravens tore at raw flesh.

Then the rider of the waves,

the skilled battle-worker,

gladly lent his hand,

to kill Skuf and Bjarni.”¹¹⁸

In this verse, he praises Thorgeir’s warrior skills and describes his actions as a sea raider.

As these incidents and verses illustrate warrior status and ability held immense importance for the men of these sagas. They go out of their way to demonstrate their abilities through confrontation, seeking revenge, and even open battle. *The Saga of the*

¹¹⁷ *The Sagas of the Sworn Brothers*, 392.

¹¹⁸ *The Sagas of the sworn brothers*, 347.

People of Vatnsdal describes one of the many battles of Harald Fairhair during his conquest of Norway. The saga states, “Many a mighty blow could be seen there. Many and great deeds were done there in a short amount of time, with blows and spear-thrusts along with fierce stone-throwing.”¹¹⁹ These situations offered warriors an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and their worth as warriors.

Warrior prowess also holds a darker side. These warriors often indulge in extreme violence and brutality. Thorgeir and Thromod are an excellent example of this. They are incapable of letting things go they defend their reputations as men and warriors with brutal violence. They are not alone in their willingness to engage their opponents with brutal intensity. *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* states, “At that moment Jokul arrived; he was again seized with his great fury and attacked Hromund savagely. His sword did not fail to bite, and neither did the weapons of the others in the fight...”¹²⁰ Throughout this saga, Jokul continually advocates violence and combat as a way to resolve issues. The difference between him and the sworn brothers is the presence of his brother Thorstein who acts as a steadying influence. The warriors that most represent wild violence and warrior brutality are berserkers, special warriors placed in the thickest areas of battle. Placed at the most dangerous part of the ship during the battle these men represented the king most important warriors. In contrast to this mostly positive description, *Grettir's Saga* presents berserkers in a negative light viewing them as troublemaking warriors unable to function in a time of peace. “Men found it a disgrace that in their country robbers and berserkers were allowed to roam freely and could

¹¹⁹ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 202.

¹²⁰ Hreinsson, 236.

challenge well-born men to duels over wealth or women.”¹²¹ Times of upheaval and state formation necessitate warriors like berserkers. However, in times of peace their chaotic and violent natures appear disruptive. Grettir gains fame and renown for driving out berserkers that show up and plague the household of Thorfinn while he is a guest.¹²² Berserkers, an asset in wartime, could become a major problem in the absence of conflict. Although warrior identity was important, out of control warriors with no enemy to fight simply caused trouble.

Warriors must also back up their reputations when the situation calls for it. Onund one of Grettir’s ancestors ridicules a group of Vikings that attacks him; he states,

“See how your wounds are bleeding!

But I don’t flinch, my friend.

I’m a one legged chieftain, yes,

but I carry no wounds from you.

Many would-be warriors

mouth off but fail to think.

Your type sadly lacks practice

in fighting to the end.”¹²³

¹²¹ *Grettir’s Saga*, 55.

¹²² *Grettir’s Saga*, 55–62.

¹²³ *Grettir’s Saga*, 16.

This boast is all the more impressive due to his injury. He retains a strong sense of masculinity despite his disability. Here he mocks them for their inability to back up their big talk with appropriate action. Suggesting that they are unable to finish the fights they start. Grettir also exhibits his cunning when he avoids a fight with a much larger group of warriors. He states, “I will not ride into a clash with loud mouthed, shield toting men; for now I leave on my own, though some day I must fight to the end. I have no wish to confront shield-bashers keyed up for a skirmish...”¹²⁴ Although a warrior and quite brave Grettir is not suicidal, he recognizes when he is outmatched. Yet sometimes evil arises that must be fought. In that time, a warrior with a plan had the advantage. In the *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* a thief with magic monstrous cats comes to the region. When the brothers decide to deal with him Jokul states, “Now you must come up with a good plan; you did right in not allowing that monster to remain in peace any longer.”¹²⁵ Warrior identity held immense significance for the men in the Icelandic Family Sagas warrior prowess allowed these men to demonstrate their masculinity in times of conflict.

Courage

Courage also plays a large role in the Family Sagas often viewed as fearlessness courage meant standing close to your allies in the face of danger. A man must be courageous in order to stand and fight in a society that respected warriors and had little patience for the weak. Thormond, Thorgeir, Jod, Grettir, and the other famous warriors

¹²⁴ *Grettir's Saga*, 171.

¹²⁵ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 231.

of this saga often demonstrate and express their lack of fear for enemies. For example, the opening description of Thormond states, “The lad was of average build with back, curly hair and was a man of vigor and courage.”¹²⁶ This characterization of Thormond from early in the saga remains true throughout. He consistently demonstrates his bravery in the face of danger and challenge. Thorgeir also receives praise for his courage. After he takes revenge for his father the saga states, “Everyone who had heard these tidings thought it remarkable that one young man on his own should have slain such an experienced fighter and chieftain as Jod.”¹²⁷ Interestingly the saga now brings in Christianity. It states, “And yet it was no great wonder since the Almighty Creator had forged in Thorgeir’s breast such a strong and sturdy heart that he was fearless and brave as a lion in what-ever trials and tribulations befell him.”¹²⁸ This quote credits God with Thorgeir’s courage clearly demonstrating Christian influence on this saga and its author’s worldview. The characters in the Family Sagas lived in a time of transition between the old pagan religions and the coming of Christianity. While the author lives in a time when Christianity dominates, his characters do not and the sagas reflect this. However, the authors are not averse to including Christian commentary on the characters and situation. The saga states, “And as all good things come from God, so too does steadfastness, and it is given unto all bold men together with free will that they may themselves choose whether to they do good or evil. Thus Jesus Christ has made Christians his sons and not his slaves, so that he might reward all according to their deeds.”¹²⁹ Here the author

¹²⁶ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 331.

¹²⁷ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 336.

¹²⁸ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 336.

¹²⁹ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 336.

presents an interesting concept, as men the characters of the saga are responsible for their own actions. Here God gives the gift of courage and bravery to all, but only those who do good will receive rewards. This statement explains how non-Christians, i.e. pagans, still possess courage and ability while also offering benefits to those who follow Christ. This statement also mentions the importance of deeds in determining a man's worth and courage. For Thorgeir and Thormond bravery is something worth testing through challenges. Thorgeir states, "Do you know of any two men as eager as we or as brave, or indeed anyone who has stood the test of his own valor so often?"¹³⁰ For the warriors of this saga bravery and courage had value and importance to ones masculinity and even societal standing. The absence of the desire to exhibit your bravery through great deeds appeared as weakness. When Ketil the Large, a great warrior in his prime, faces a challenge that he is too old to accomplish, he provokes his son Thorstein to action. Ketil states, "The behavior of young men today is not what it was when I was young. In those days men hankered after deeds of derring-do, either by going raiding or by winning wealth and honor through exploits in which there was some element of danger."¹³¹ Here the father draws a clear association between one's masculinity and the deeds one does. Facing danger with courage and bold actions offered opportunities to prove yourself and gain wealth. However, as Ketil explains something has changed with the coming of the next generation. He states, "But nowadays young men want to be stay-at-homes, and sit by the fire, and stuff their stomachs with mead and ale; and so it is that manliness and bravery are on the wane. I have won wealth and honor because I dared to face danger and

¹³⁰ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 344.

¹³¹ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 189–190.

tough single combats.”¹³² He provokes his son by pricking at his manliness claiming that he is one of a generation of stay at home weaklings. Again, he makes the association between ones courage and the deeds one performs. Provoked into action his son goes on to make a name for himself.¹³³ One of the actions that Ketil mentions, as a way to prove your bravery is single combat. An example of this occurs in *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* encountering a warrior named Berg the Bold the men of Vatnsdal end up in a conflict over an insult. The conflict escalates until fed up with the insults Jokul challenges Berg to a duel. He states, “You must now turn up to the duel if you have a man’s heart rather than a mare’s. And if anyone fails to turn up, then a scorn-pole will be raised up against him with this curse - that he will be coward in the eyes of all men, and will never again share the fellowship of good folk...”¹³⁴ Jokul boxes Berg into a corner he must go through with the duel if he wants to prove his masculinity. The other family sags continue this theme of the importance of bold actions to prove ones courage. *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* holds up its central characters as examples of courage. One of the poems on Thorgeir states, “Thorgeir taught how a fighter must stand fast by his kinsman’s side boisterous though it be to follow such a man. From the north came news of the spreader of hand-rock, I heard how Thorgeir’s heart was brave beyond compare.”¹³⁵ This poem presents Thorgeir as a man worth following both for his courage and for his generosity. This saga goes on to elaborate on where Thorgeir’s famous courage comes from. It states, “No man was known to have put up such a fight as he. It

¹³² Hreinsson, 190.

¹³³ Hreinsson, 190.

¹³⁴ Hreinsson, 245.

¹³⁵ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*.

was the Almighty who touched Thorgeir's heart and put such fearlessness into his breast, and thus his courage was neither inborn nor of humankind but came from the Creator on high."¹³⁶ Thorgeir's courage stems from a higher power. *Grettir's Saga* contains an analysis of the courage of three famous outlaws by a farmer who was able to handle all three staying with him he stated:

All of them I believe are thoroughly brave men. Yet two among them know what it is to be fearful. In this, however they are different: Thormod is a God-fearing man with a deep belief, while Grettir is so scared of the dark that, if left to follow his own wishes, he does not travel after darkness has fallen. But, my kinsman, Thorgier does not know what it is to be scared.¹³⁷

This analysis of these outlaws reveals that courage often meant a lack of fear rather than a willingness to face danger. Courage serves as an essential aspect of Norse ideal masculinity in the Family Sagas. It enables the other attributes to function well.

Great Deeds

In the family sagas, great deeds served as an important aspect of masculinity. Performing great deeds demonstrated your masculinity and could even improve your social status. Great deeds include raiding, feats of daring or strength, and achieving order. The possession of authority and a fearsome reputation allowed a man to dominate in politics and economic disputes. For example the reason, Jod's death lends so much to Thorgeir's standing is his status and reputation. The saga states, "He was a chieftain and a great champion, but he was difficult to get along with and had a reputation for being unfair in his dealing with others. He had authority in the district, but was ambitious and

¹³⁶ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 368.

¹³⁷ *Grettir's Saga*, 137.

slew many men while rarely paying compensation for the lives he took.”¹³⁸ Jod’s volatile personality often gets him in trouble yet his status as a chieftain allows him to bully others. His actions establish his reputation as a troublemaker. The role ones actions play in determining reputation continues throughout the saga. As Thromond states in a drapa, “Actions speak louder than words.”¹³⁹ Thorgeir is such a dominating figure throughout the saga in part due to the great actions he performs. Thormond states,

“Six times he set forth
on his sea-charger hence,
tree of the valkyrie’s gusts,
bold to deliver the wound-snake;
hurtful to wealth, he led
his black ship to the sea,
and wrought great deeds.
This I learned at home.”¹⁴⁰

Thorgeir’s success from raiding reinforces his masculinity. Other characters also perform great deeds that demonstrate their strength and ability. For example, Kolbak the slave of Grima ambushes Thormond with the help of Grima’s magic.¹⁴¹ Forced to flee his final

¹³⁸ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 332.

¹³⁹ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 339.

¹⁴⁰ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 349.

¹⁴¹ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 352.

mention in the saga shows his potential, “Kolbak was taken by a group of vikings and proved to be a hardy man in all tests of strength.”¹⁴² Grettir, also continually demonstrates his formidable strength and abilities as a warrior through his great deeds. When he defeats an entire band of berserkers using cunning and strength the mistress of the farm he saves states, “We had no idea that you had so much courage as you have now shown. Within this house, you have only to ask for anything you want. All is yours which is proper for me to give and honorable for you to receive.”¹⁴³ Grettir’s great deed here shows off his manly courage and earns him great rewards. Throughout the saga, Grettir takes on numerous major challenges and emerges victorious. He defeats a mound-dweller and wins a saxe earning the esteem of the local chief Thorfinn.¹⁴⁴ In another instance, he defeats a pagan slave turned walking dead named Glam. A fight that leaves him cursed never to grow stronger, his accomplishments will lead to outlawry and killings, and finally he will be followed everywhere by the vision of Glam’s eyes afraid to be alone.¹⁴⁵ Even with this against him Grettir still manages to accomplish many great things including slaying a Troll woman and a giant.¹⁴⁶ Yet in spite of this, Grettir’s struggles with outlawry make him a burden on the local populations and cause him to lose his standing and support within society. About midway through his adventures as an outlaw, the Law-speaker Skapti tells Grettir, “I have been told that you have been acting rather unwisely and robbing men of their possessions. This is unworthy of you, a man of such

¹⁴² *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 353.

¹⁴³ *Grettir’s Saga*, 61.

¹⁴⁴ *Grettir’s Saga*, 52–53.

¹⁴⁵ *Grettir’s Saga*, 102–103.

¹⁴⁶ *Grettir’s Saga*, 172–179.

noble lineage.”¹⁴⁷ This represents an interesting difference between the portrayal of Grettir and Thorgeir. Thorgeir commits numerous violent acts and has many people out to kill him in revenge. Yet unlike Grettir, he does not receive criticism for betraying his ancestry. This is in part due to Grettir’s origins as Grettir is descended from the people of Vatnsdal one of the founding families of Iceland. This connects to how different levels of Icelandic society reflect this focus on the importance of great deeds. The Family Sagas are full of characters from all up and down the social ladder. From great chieftains to violent loners the saga diagnoses these men according to their actions. For example, the description of one of the many troublemakers in the saga states, “There was a man named Butraldi, a loner of no fixed abode. He was a large, powerfully-built man with an ugly face, quick-tempered and vengeful, and he was a great slayer of men. He worked as a hired hand during the summers and wandered about during the winter-time with two other men, staying at various farms for a few nights at a time.”¹⁴⁸ This quote offers several good insights into how a man’s value was determined in Icelandic culture. Butraldi is a loner he lacks a group to connect to in addition he is violent and often kills other men. To describe him as a great slayer of men is more of a complement than a mark against him. Many of the heroes of the Icelandic Family Sagas also receive this moniker. However, his nomadic nature makes this problematic as he lacks support in cases against him. He operates outside the system of compensation and support that other warriors possess. Butraldi stands in contrast to Thorgirm another troublemaker who appears later in the saga. The saga states, “Thorgrim Troll, the son of Einar, lived in Einarsfjord on Longunes. He was a *godi*, a great and powerful chieftain and excellent champion who

¹⁴⁷ *Grettir’s Saga*, 148.

¹⁴⁸ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 341.

had many men under his command.”¹⁴⁹ Throgrim who will eventually kill Thorgeir is much higher up on the societal ladder. He is a chieftain and has numerous followers. As a result, he gets away with killing and fighting something Butraldi is unable to do. Throughout *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, great deeds play an important role in determining one’s masculinity and societal standing. Yet support from your fellow men was important without a good reputation and followers one became a loner with no help in times of trouble. One of the reasons that the men of Vatnsdal are so successful in their many battles with various disagreeable individuals is their family connections and strong position in society. For example, in revenge for the death of their father Ingimund they attack and defeat Hrolleif and his mother the witch Ljot.¹⁵⁰ The brothers also kill a thief named Thorolf Sledgehammer and his magic cats.¹⁵¹ They are even victorious in a particularly violent land dispute with a farmer named Mar. This disagreement results in a pitched battle that ends with Thorstein arbitrating the settlement in favor of him and his brothers.¹⁵² The men of Vatnsdal are able to cement their status as important leaders in the region through the great deeds they do in bringing order and stability to the local area. At the same time their large family and high status protects them from reprisals in a way unavailable to outlaws like Grettir and Thormond. For these warriors the great deeds that they did ensured a lasting legacy and cemented their status as leaders. Their descendants refer back to this time of great deeds and the warriors who carried them out. This

¹⁴⁹ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 373.

¹⁵⁰ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 221–229.

¹⁵¹ Hreinsson, 231.

¹⁵² Hreinsson, 236.

connects them with the heroic tradition of their ancestors and provides support for their current actions. In *Grettir's Saga*, a farm hand named Thorfinn attacks Thorgeir a descendant of the famous Onund Tree-foot. His attempt goes awry when his axe strikes a skin of whey and he runs away thinking he has killed Thorgeir based on the sound. However, Thorgeir survives and someone composes this verse about the incident,

“In better day’s men renowned
for their gifts and glory bathed
swords gleaming like fish
in wounds cut deep as trenches.
But that one creep, who’s lost all respect
of one and all a pure
coward, dips both cheeks
of his axe in a skinful of whey.”¹⁵³

This quote harks back to a time when warriors won fame a time now lost in the face of the cowardly warriors of the present. The final words of *The Saga of The People of Vatnsdal* echo this theme of looking to the glories of the past. The saga states speaking of Thorkel, “...a great district leader and a man blessed with great luck and a man most like the old Vatnsdal men such as Thorstein and Ingimund. However, Thorkel surpassed them in that he was a man of the true faith, and loved God, and prepared himself for his death

¹⁵³ *Grettir's Saga*, 27.

in a Christian way.”¹⁵⁴ In contrast to the cowardly actions of Thorfinn, Thorkel honors his ancestors and behaves in a manner worthy of their great deeds. In addition, the author reflecting his Christian bias praises Thorkel for his acceptance of Christianity and his faithfulness to his new religion.

Wealth

The wealth a man possessed specifically special weapons and property played an important role in ideal conception of Norse masculinity through the Icelandic Family Sagas. The men in these sagas go to great lengths to obtain and show off their weapons and special gear. A man’s weapons allowed him to take on the role of a warrior and to demonstrate his masculinity through great feats of arms. In addition, legendary and hereditary weapons connected a warrior with the great warriors of his past and identified him as a part of that great warrior tradition. The description of Thorgeir shows off his weapons and identifies him as a warrior. The saga states, “He was a large man, brave in appearance, and of enormous physical strength. He had a broad axe, a mighty weapon, keen-edged and sharp, with which he had sent many a man to dine in Valhalla. He also had a barbed spear with a hard point, a large socket, and a thick shaft. In those days, very few men were armed with swords.”¹⁵⁵ This quote contains several interesting details. It not only lists Thorgeir’s weapons but also proves that he uses them. It also makes the comment that few men owned swords indicating that the appearance of such a weapon is of intense interest. Grettir at the beginning of his journeys obtains a special sword.

¹⁵⁴ Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 269.

¹⁵⁵ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 333.

Outlawed for murder Grettir prepares to leave Iceland. While his father gives him nothing commenting on their fractured relationship. Grettir's mother gives him a sword and not just any sword; she states, "Jokul my grandfather owned this sword, as did others of the Vatnsdal men, and it brought them victory. Now I want to give this sword to you. Use it well."¹⁵⁶ Interestingly Grettir's mother as opposed to his father gives Grettir a weapon. Through this sword, she is connecting Grettir to the great warriors of her family tree. She is enabling him to accomplish great deeds and to act in a way that demonstrates his masculinity. This sword is the weapon of Jokul, one of the sons of Ingimund, the most hotheaded and violent of the heroic men of Vatnsdal from *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*. Her gift passes on the warrior legacy of his ancestors. Eager to establish his own reputation Grettir soon comes into possession of another valuable and powerful weapon. While staying with a farmer named Thorfinn on the island of Haramarsey Grettir battles a mound-dweller and recovers great treasures among these is a sax.¹⁵⁷ Grettir is particularly enamored with this weapon and later after further proving himself gains the weapon for himself. He speaks this verse about the weapon,

"In the grave-mound's gloomy chamber,

I snatched a short-sword, my friend –

nothing short about the gashes

it cuts. The ghost succumbed.

¹⁵⁶ *Grettir's Saga*, 45.

¹⁵⁷ *Grettir's Saga*, 50–51.

That gleaming blade spells death
by a short chop through the helmet.
If I were this short sword's owner,
never would it slip from my hands."¹⁵⁸

These verses further emphasize the importance placed on great weapons. Grettir considers this short sword of great value and is willing to go through great dangers to gain it. Grettir will use this sword in many of his great feats and in the end will die with this weapon in his hands. Thorstein the Galleon will use this weapon to avenge his brother Grettir all the way down in Constantinople.¹⁵⁹ One of the primary forms of wealth was the possession of special weapons and equipment that conferred status and strength to the user. However, this was not the only use of wealth.

Another common use for wealth appears within the system of compensation. In the Icelandic and early medieval legal systems, individuals were required to pay compensation for criminal acts. Men from a large and wealthy family could afford to pay compensation and settle an issue before it led to further violence. This process often enriched the winners and offered new levels of prosperity. One of the largest accusations leveled against Jod the chieftain that Thorgeir kills at the beginning of *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers* is that he fails to pay compensation for his murderous actions.¹⁶⁰ While Grettir is a full outlaw, a case arises where Thorodd Poem Stump seeks compensation for

¹⁵⁸ *Grettir's Saga*, 53.

¹⁵⁹ *Grettir's Saga*, 224.

¹⁶⁰ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 332.

his brother. However, due to Grettir's existing status as an outlaw, he cannot defend himself. The Law-speakers statement reveals much about how money can secure compensation. He states, "...but Grettir's kinsmen will not rain down money for either Grettir or his actions if it buys him no peace."¹⁶¹ This statement indicates that although compensation is the common method for resolving disputes, people are unwilling to lay down money without some sort of gain. In particular, a gain in accordance with their social and political goals in this case freeing Grettir. The men of Vatnsdal also seek to use this system of compensation to their advantage. For example, when they engage in a violent conflict with their kinsman Mar it turns out well for them and Thorstein receives judgment powers. He decides to outlaw several troublemakers even refusing to pay compensation for injuring one of them. In addition, he stipulates that Mar must pay for the land he wants.¹⁶² Thorstein cleverly uses the legal systems of compensation to his advantage resolving the conflict and avoiding punishment for the damage inflicted on Mar's followers. The use of wealth played an important role in resolving issues of compensation. Often it proved to be a better decision to take the money instead of using fighting to get what you want. When a pitiful specimen named Hunrod fails to seek timely compensation for his brother Throkell the leader of the people of Vatnsdal states, "It was bad advice to follow, not to accept compensation for your brother, when he told you earlier that you would gain nothing else; and now you have neither money nor

¹⁶¹ *Grettir's Saga*, 138.

¹⁶² Hreinsson, *The Sagas of the Icelanders Including 49 Tales*, 236.

revenge.”¹⁶³ Compensation offered an opportunity for individuals to gain wealth and prestige.

A man must also be able to hold on to his wealth and to protect it from theft. The Family Sagas are full of disputes over land and movable wealth. One of the most infamous examples of theft occurs in *Grettir's Saga* a curious incident known as the Saddle-Head Verses. Upon finding, that his father and brother are dead and he has become an outlaw, Grettir steals a horse and sets off. The horse's owner a farmer named Svein gives chase. This leads to a crazy series of episodes where Grettir leaves behind verses and Svein upon hearing them responds with his own. When they finally meet that saga states, “After each spoke his verses, Grettir said he could find nothing at fault with Svein looking after what was his. Farmer Svein stayed there during the night, as did Grettir, and they had great fun together. They called these the Saddle-Head verses.”¹⁶⁴ This series of events reveals much about Icelandic conceptions of property and ownership. There exists no police force to prevent thieves. It is on Svein alone to recover his property. From what he says in his verses, Svein considers the thieving actions of Grettir somewhat cowardly and not in keeping with his role as a warrior. It is mostly due to the unique personalities of these two men that the episode turns out as well as it does. Other incidents of theft in the sagas do not go quite as well. For example, when Thorgeir and Thormond, ever the troublemakers, stay at the house of a woman named Sigurfljod she prompts them to attack and defeat a pair of notorious thieves named Ingolf and Thorbrand, both friends of Vermund a local chieftain. The sworn brothers then confront

¹⁶³ Hreinsson, 268.

¹⁶⁴ *Grettir's Saga*, 127.

Igolf and Thorbrands at their farm. Thorgeir states, “We come to lay down conditions and redress an imbalance. We give you a choice. Either you hand over all the property you have wrongfully taken, and thus buy your lives, or defend that property like men to the death.”¹⁶⁵ Thorgeir’s statement reveals that while he views the property as stolen he is more concerned with righting an imbalance and helping the widow who has sheltered them. Thorbrand responds by stating, “What we have taken we took like men, and bravely too, and we will not part with it in any other manner. As for you Thorgeir I think you’ll sooner be breakfasting on my spear than on my property.”¹⁶⁶ Thorbrand exhibits a classic might makes right outlook. He now sees the property as his alone. Yet Thorgeir cannot stand for this in his final parting shot before they fight he states somewhat prophetically, “Ill-begotten gains never come to any good.”¹⁶⁷ The sworn brothers are not the only men willing to engage in battle over disputed property. Grettir’s grandfather Thorgrim battles his neighbors for a beached whale during a time of famine.¹⁶⁸ The men of Vatnsdal also get into many fights over property including one over fishing rights against Hrolleif a troublemaker whose mother is a witch.¹⁶⁹ A man in addition to collecting and managing his wealth well must also defend it against thieves and troublemakers. The successful men of the Family Sagas effectively shepherd their wealth

¹⁶⁵ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 338.

¹⁶⁶ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 338.

¹⁶⁷ *The Sagas of Icelanders*, 338.

¹⁶⁸ *Grettir’s Saga*, 28–30.

¹⁶⁹ Hreinsson, *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, 221.

and protect it from attacks. In a time with no functioning police force, justice depended on the strength and warrior abilities of the men of the family.

The leading men of *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, *Grettir's Saga*, and *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal* present a varied and complex view of the ideal conception of Norse masculinity. These men exhibit the four main characteristics of masculinity: warrior identity, courage, great deeds, and wealth. These different aspects of masculinity come together and make up the picture of what it means to be a man in the eyes of the saga authors. These sagas focus on the struggles and disputes of everyday life in Iceland and beyond. The men of the Family Sagas may not rule kingdoms or confront armies instead; they demonstrate their masculinity through their battles with their neighbors and the occasional supernatural monster. Their actions and poetry explore what it means to be a man within the turbulent world of Icelandic society. In the absence of a strong centralized government, individual action takes on new levels of importance. This requires these men to stand up for themselves and to enforce their own authority.

A KINGS REPUTATION

The final picture of Norse masculinity comes from the Kings' Sagas that focus on historical and sometimes legendary kings. In particular, the sagas of the kings of Norway offer numerous insights into kingship and masculinity. These sags appear in the *Heimskringla* a work by the famous Icelandic historian and poet Snorri Sturluson. The kings of these sagas are historical figures yet they possess a deep connection to the warrior tradition and legendary heroes of the past. Their timeline runs roughly equivalent to the heroes and outlaws of the Family Sagas. In addition, they both draw on a common warrior tradition. However, as kings these individuals hold a unique position in society and as a result have demands and opportunities that less powerful men do not. The three sagas under examination here are *The Saga of Harald Fairhair*, *The Saga of Harald Sigurtharson*, and *The Saga of Magnús Barelegs*. The ideal conception of masculinity in these sagas centers on three main traits: warrior prowess, wealth, and sovereignty. The first two traits the Kings sagas hold in common with both the Legendary and Family sagas. The last trait, sovereignty, is something unique to the demands and role of kingship. A strong and masculine king held firmly on to his territories and suppressed revolt. The crisis comes when a king fails to exhibit these traits.

Warrior Prowess

The first characteristic of ideal masculinity that these kings hold dear is warrior prowess. Their identity as warriors and conquerors held great importance for these kings. In many ways, they are primarily military leaders. Without the mindset of a conqueror, these kings could not hope to realize their political ambitions. For example, King Harald states at the beginning of his conquest of Norway, “I make this vow, and call God to witness, him who created me and governs all, that I shall neither cut nor comb my hair before I have conquered all of Norway, with all its taxes and revenues, and govern it altogether or else die.”¹⁷⁰ This vow will lead to Harald’s famous moniker of Fairhair once his victory is complete. Harald calls on God to make witness to his vow to conquer Norway. He is not alone in this conquest mentality. His descendant Harald Hardradi embarks on a conquest of England.¹⁷¹ While Magnús Barelegs even, further down the line, launches a conquest of Ireland.¹⁷²

As befitting the image of a strong masculine king the saga describes Harald as acting like a warrior from an early age. It states, “Fain outside would he drink ale at Yule-tide, the fray-loving folk-warder, and Frey’s-game play there. Even half-grown, he hated the hearth-fire cozy, the warm women’s room, and the wadded down mittens.”¹⁷³ The saga attests to Harald’s early experience with war at his burial. The sagas states, “He was a great warrior during the early part of his life.”¹⁷⁴ Harald Hardradi the central king and

¹⁷⁰ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 61–62.

¹⁷¹ Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga* (Penguin UK, 2005), 137.

¹⁷² Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 683.

¹⁷³ Snorri and Hollander, 72.

¹⁷⁴ Snorri and Hollander, 94.

hero of the *Saga of Harald Sigurtharson* also shows a tendency towards warfare from an early age. Fleeing for his life after the fall of his brother Olaf, Harald travels south to Constantinople. There he becomes the commander of the Varangians and leads several campaigns.¹⁷⁵ The saga states in poetry form,

“Bravely the young gold-giver
Risky his life constantly,
Capturing eighty cities
In the Land of the Saracens;
Then the young warrior,
Scourge of the Saarcens
Waged his grim game of war
On the level plains of Sicily.”¹⁷⁶

These verses emphasize Harald’s bravery and skill at a young age. Harald Hardradi is also famous for his clever battle tactics. During his conquest of Sicily Harald uses a number of clever stratagems to outwit and outmaneuver his enemies. He undertakes a number of complex plans including setting fire to birds, digging tunnels, holding sports contest with concealed weapons and even faking his death.¹⁷⁷ The kings of these sagas are warriors from a young age they engage in war with skill and ferocity. Their

¹⁷⁵ Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga*, 45–50.

¹⁷⁶ Sturluson, 51.

¹⁷⁷ Sturluson, 52–57.

descendants carry on this tradition. The *Saga of Magnús Barelegs* states, “He preserved the peace in it, destroying all the Vikings and pirates. He was a vigorous man, warlike and active, and in every respect more like his grandfather Harald in disposition than his father.”¹⁷⁸ Magnús reflects his grandfather’s warrior king behavior. This passage at the end of his saga places him on the same plane as the warrior kings of the past. In contrast to his, father Olaf the Gentle. In order to be a strong a successful warrior a king must be courageous and exhibit immense ferocity and skill in combat. Harald Fairhair is an excellent example of this. His saga states,

“Harald on heights wooded-
hardily he fought aye-
battled against banner
bearers wishing for combat;
ere that the king, ever-
eager, led his shield-clad
roller horses, ready for
riding, ‘gainst his foemen.”¹⁷⁹

In this verse, Harald leads his troops from the frontlines he strikes out leading his warships in battle. Other verses in this saga depict Harald personally becoming involved in sea combat. The saga states, “Finally King Harald became so wrathful and furious that

¹⁷⁸ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 674.

¹⁷⁹ Snorri and Hollander, 65.

he went forward in his ship and fought so valiantly that all the men in the bow of King Arnvith's ship retreated to the mast and some fell."¹⁸⁰ In both these cases, Harald engages the enemy from the forecastle or the front of the ship the most dangerous position on board a Scandinavian longship. Standing here the warrior is the first person exposed to enemy fire. They are also unprotected by the shields lining the ships sides. However, as in Harald's case this spot offered great opportunities for glory, giving the warrior a chance to make first contact and severely maul the enemy. As a result, only the most experienced warriors fight at this location.¹⁸¹ Harald Hardradi also exhibits this willingness to lead from the front and to place himself in harm's way. During the famous battle of Stamford Bridge in northern England the saga states, "The battle became very fierce, and great numbers were killed on both sides. King Harald Sigurdson now fell into such a fury of battle that he rushed forward ahead of his troops, fighting two-handed. Neither helmets nor coats of mail could withstand him, and everyone in his path gave way before him."¹⁸² Here Harald falls into a berserker-like fury and tears into the enemy.¹⁸³ Harald's ferocious attack demonstrates his courage and role as a warrior king. Given the intensely personal nature of early medieval leadership Harald's display of courage is necessary to spur his men on in combat. The saga further states,

"Eagle-hearted Harald

¹⁸⁰ Snorri and Hollander, 67.

¹⁸¹ For example the chieftain Onund loses his leg while standing on the bow in *Grettir's Saga*.

¹⁸² Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 152.

¹⁸³ Interestingly the English histories of the account mention a massive warrior holding the bridge and slaying forty men. This could be Harald who was known for his great height.

Urged his men to battle;
No hope of peace he offered
To Norway's sturdy seamen.
Norway's famous war-king
Charged them to die nobly
And not think of yielding;
His men then seized their weapons."¹⁸⁴

He gives his men no other option, but to follow him. His courageous attacks prove that he is a king worth following. The saga enunciates this clearly when it states, "He was an outstandingly brave warrior, and he also had great victory-luck."¹⁸⁵ These two factors allow Harald to be a king worth following not only is he brave but he also wins. Harald Hardradi is not alone in this. Magnús also exhibits intense bravery and warrior skill. During one battle, Magnús fires an arrow, which slays a Welsh earl.¹⁸⁶ His poet Bjorn the Crippled states,

"Darts then drummed on byrnies
doughtily hurled by war-lord.
Blood rose on helms. Bent his

¹⁸⁴ Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 111.

¹⁸⁵ Sturluson, 160.

¹⁸⁶ Interestingly Magnús uses a bow instead of a sword or axe more common heroic weapons. This illustrates that the medieval stigma against bows as a lower class weapons has not arisen.

bow of elm the atheling.
A hail of arrows hit the
hauberks-many fell there-
when the Horthar's king in
hard fight slew Hugh Earl.”¹⁸⁷

Magnús proves his skill by eliminating the enemy leader. Even Magnús' nickname communicates his warlike nature. Although often-called Barelegs due to the short kilt like garments he brings over from the English Isles the saga also labels him, “Styrjalder Magnús [Magnús of the turbulence, warfare]”¹⁸⁸ His death also communicates his militant nature and intense courage. The saga account states, “King Magnús was wounded with a spear passing through both his thighs above the knee. He grasped the shaft between his legs and broke it, and said: “Thus we break every leg-spar men!” King Magnús received a blow with a battle-axe on his neck, and that was his death wound.”¹⁸⁹ He dies in battle breaking the spear proving to his men that the enemy could not harm them. In many ways, Magnús represents the perfect warlike king he goes to war often departing from the calmer behavior of his father. The saga describes him as, “He was a great a fearless warrior, very strong and better skilled in arms than any other man...”¹⁹⁰ The three kings in this chapter all represent the ideal masculine warrior king. To be a

¹⁸⁷ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 677.

¹⁸⁸ Snorri and Hollander, 681.

¹⁸⁹ Snorri and Hollander, 686.

¹⁹⁰ Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 86.

great king and even a man one must be a warrior. Even Saint Olaf a king who becomes a canonized saint the sagas describe as a, “War-loving prince.”¹⁹¹ Magnús’s reply to his followers offers the best summary of the attitude of these kings toward war. The saga says, “It is recalled that when his friends told him that he proceeded incautiously on his expeditions abroad he replied, “For glorious deeds one should have a king, not for a long life.”¹⁹² This mentality governs their perspective on battle and war. Why else would Harald Fairhair seek to conquer Norway? Why would Harald Hardradi attempt his invasion of England or Magnús his invasion of Ireland? While there may be other factors involved, the drive to do great things and prove one’s warrior prowess played a major role.

Wealth

Another key factor in ideal masculinity in the Kings sagas is wealth. How a king gathered, demonstrated, and gave away his wealth defined who his followers would be and shaped his reputation. King Harald Fairhair is particularly good at this. He uses wealth and positions to reward his followers. This in turn allows him to build the necessary support to conduct his conquest of Norway. To do this Harald appropriated the ancestral lands and divided them into districts ruled over by earls. While they had, certain obligations like maintaining order and raising troops, they received a third of the taxes. This drew many followers as the saga states, “...his earls had more power than kings had had before...many men of influence joined the king and became his followers.”¹⁹³

¹⁹¹ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 258.

¹⁹² Snorri and Hollander, 686–687.

¹⁹³ Snorri and Hollander, 63.

Harald's strategic use of important positions helps him win control of Norway. In addition to attracting large groups of followers, Harald also used the threat of force combined with the reward to bring in more powerful and important figures. For example, when King Hrollaug hears that Harald is marching to attack him he ritually demotes himself to earl and surrenders his realm offering to follow Harald. Harald's response reveals that he is a keen strategist. The saga states, "Then King Harald took a sword and fastened it in Hrollaug's belt. He hung the shield around his shoulder and named him his earl and led him to the high-seat. He gave him the District of Naumu Dale to rule, setting him as earl over it."¹⁹⁴ This symbolic act places Hrollaug under Harald and ensures Harald's control of the region. The gifts of the sword and shield in addition the installment of Hrollaug as an earl exhibit Harald's generosity. This generosity was very important to the king's followers. When Harald turns against the sons of the woman who he loved his friend Thjóthólf goes to intercede for them. At the feast, Harald wonders why so many of his, "old hoary henchmen" are there he accuses them of being too fond of drink.¹⁹⁵ Thjóthólf's response reveals the importance of the connection between generosity and loyalty. He states, "Upon our heads have we, hoard-despoiler many wounds from combat with thee: were not too many there then."¹⁹⁶ Here he reminds Harald both of the loyalty of his men and of Harald's own generosity. The kenning he uses means "generous prince"¹⁹⁷ a title that reflects Harald's role as a leader. The end

¹⁹⁴ Snorri and Hollander, 64.

¹⁹⁵ Snorri and Hollander, 81.

¹⁹⁶ Snorri and Hollander, 81.

¹⁹⁷ Snorri and Hollander, 81.

description of Harald reinforces this view of him. The saga states, “Men well versed in history say that Harald Fairhair was of exceedingly handsome appearance, very strong and tall, most generous of his substance and extremely well liked by his men.”¹⁹⁸ Harald Fairhair does not stand-alone as the only generous king Harald Hardradi also uses wealth to his advantage collecting large numbers of followers. After Magnus Harald’s nephew offers to split the kingdom between them Harald contributes by offering to divide his wealth he states, “Yesterday you gave me a great kingdom which you had wrested from your enemies and mine... For my own part, I have spent much time in foreign lands and had to undergo not a few hazards in order to amass the gold you now see before you. Now I want to share this wealth with you.”¹⁹⁹ Here Harald explains that the attaining this wealth was difficult much like Magnús’s conquest. This in turn lends more weight to his gift. Harald also hands out specific smaller gifts to important figures further cementing his position and demonstrating his generosity. For example, he gives Thorir of Steig a carved maple wood bowl, a couple gold bracelets, and Harald’s own cloak.²⁰⁰ While Harald can be greedy, he always makes sure to reinforce his authority through the giving of wealth. When he defeats the Danes in battle he first cares for his dead and injured men and then the saga states, “After that he shared out the spoils.”²⁰¹ The saga spells out Harald’s nature during his obituary passage it states, “King Harald was exceptionally greedy for power and valuable possessions. But he was very generous to those of his

¹⁹⁸ Snorri and Hollander, 94.

¹⁹⁹ Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga*, 72.

²⁰⁰ Sturluson, 73.

²⁰¹ Sturluson, 117.

friends he liked.”²⁰² This reflects Harald’s nature perfectly and reveals the ideal behavior of a generous king. Greed was not a sin or even an issue as long as the king made sure to reward his followers. His poet echoes this theme of generosity stating,

“Norway’s liberal sea-king
Gave me gold for my poetry;
His royal favors are always
Determined only by merit.”²⁰³

He gives Harald a much nicer analysis no doubt stemming from the fact that Harald is his patron. While Harald proves that, a king can be both greedy and generous his grandson Magnús demonstrates that he possesses none of Harald’s generous inclinations. In fact, when he discovers that his opponent for kingship of Norway his cousin Håkon has reduced taxes and ended special tribute practices he becomes enraged. Only Håkon’s premature death of sickness while crossing the mountains protects him from Magnús’s revenge.²⁰⁴ However, this incident does illustrate that importance of generosity in gaining the peoples affection. Because of his policies, Håkon becomes intensely popular with the people of Trondheim. After his death the people mourn him the saga states, “Then all the people of the town most of them weeping, came to meet the body of the king, because everybody had loved him with heartfelt affection.”²⁰⁵ This affection is undoubtedly due

²⁰² Sturluson, 161.

²⁰³ Sturluson, 161.

²⁰⁴ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 667–668.

²⁰⁵ Snorri and Hollander, 669.

in part to Håkon's generosity. In contrast, throughout the saga Magnús shows himself to be greedy and as a result alienates many important followers. A notable case is that of Skopti Ogmundarson whose father had risked his life in battle to protect the king.²⁰⁶ In a dispute of a piece of inheritance, Skopti pleads with Magnús pointing to his family's tradition of loyal service and his legal rights to the property. Magnús stubbornly refuses even in the face of the pleas of Skopti's sons.²⁰⁷ The statement by Ogmund Skoptason is particularly revealing he states, "You are likely, sir king, to succeed in wronging us, because of your power. Thus is proven true that, as the saying goes, most people show little or no gratitude, even if you save their lives. But I shall want it understood that never again shall I join your service, nor any of our kin..."²⁰⁸ He argues correctly that it is Magnús's position that allows him to get away with such behavior. The most striking part however is his refusal to serve or to allow his kin to do so. Magnús's greedy nature isolates him and turns both the upper and lower levels of society against him. He has the wealth of a king as evidenced in this description, "King Magnús had a helmet on his head and a red shield before him on which a lion was embossed in gold. He was girt with the sword Legbiter, whose hilt was carved of walrus tooth and whose haft was wound in gold..."²⁰⁹ Yet he lacks the generosity of his ancestors that allowed them to gather and maintain large numbers of followers. The collection and use of wealth had a direct impact on a king's success and popularity. Greed goes hand in hand with generosity.

²⁰⁶ Snorri and Hollander, 680.

²⁰⁷ Snorri and Hollander, 681–82.

²⁰⁸ Snorri and Hollander, 682.

²⁰⁹ Snorri and Hollander, 685.

Sovereignty

The third attribute of ideal Norse masculinity in the King's sagas is sovereignty. Establishing and maintaining political and military control over the regions that they conquered held great importance to these kings. They often actively suppressed revolt and built alliances to strengthen their kingdom and to ensure prosperity. This factor is unique to the Kings' Sagas. While other heroes and leaders often worked to protect their property and positions as kings, the men of these sagas possessed unique responsibilities. These kings often had to contend with claims of other rulers on their territory. In the early days of his reign, Harald Fairhair worked to curb Swedish power in the Eastern Districts. The Swedish king Eirík Eymundarson, eager for more territory, had begun leveling tribute and collecting followers. The saga captures Harald's response stating, "This highly displeased King Harald and he called an assembly of the farmers there in Fold. He accused them of treason against himself. Some farmers managed to prove their innocence and some had to pay fines, others were punished."²¹⁰ Here Harald asserts his dominance and demonstrates his ability to regain control over territories that have lapsed into enemy hands. However as this quote indicates not everyone was happy to become part of Harald's domain. The war that Harald wages to control Norway creates many allies and enemies. The saga states, "During the times of warfare when King Harald brought Norway under his domination, foreign lands such as Faroes and Iceland were settled... many of the nobility fled King Harald as outlaws and went on Viking expeditions to the west,"²¹¹. In spite of this exodus, some remained, "But also many of the nobility pledged

²¹⁰ Snorri and Hollander, 70.

²¹¹ Snorri and Hollander, 76.

their allegiance to King Harald, entered his service, and helped to build up the country with him.”²¹² A dramatic and total conquest like the one conducted by Harald inspired such polarizing actions. In many ways, this also illustrates Harald’s sovereignty and control over his new territory. Those not already defeated or allied with him have only two choices join or flee. Harald further demonstrates his sovereignty by clearing out the Vikings in the Western Isles and even deflecting attempts by the English king Æhelstān to control subvert his authority.²¹³ Harald is not always able to maintain control over his kingdom. On two occasions, he loses control to others. The first occurs when he marries Sneofrith a Finnish woman the saga states that he, “...loved her so madly that he neglected his kingdom and all his duties.”²¹⁴ His love quickly turns to delusion when she dies. He sits by her side for three years until his advisors convince him to move her corpse.²¹⁵ This incident in many ways emasculates Harald instead of acting like a masculine king by mastering his grief and ruling well. Harald neglects his responsibilities causing his people to fear he has been bewitched.²¹⁶ Harald again loses control this time to his sons. Not content without titles and kingdoms of their own Harald’s many sons raid and cause trouble all throughout the country.²¹⁷ The saga describes them thus stating, “Many of them committed deeds of violence in the country, and disagreed among themselves. They drove some earls of the king from their possessions and even killed

²¹² Snorri and Hollander, 76.

²¹³ Snorri and Hollander, 77,92.

²¹⁴ Snorri and Hollander, 80.

²¹⁵ Snorri and Hollander, 80.

²¹⁶ Snorri and Hollander, 80.

²¹⁷ Snorri and Hollander, 83.

some.”²¹⁸ Harald’s response to their wild behavior illustrates his lack of control over his kingdom and his sons. He decides that all his sons will receive the title king and the lands of an earl. To make matters worse the high seat will go to Harald’s favorite the violent and brutal Eirík.²¹⁹ This policy only makes his sons eager for more land and sparks numerous internal conflicts and assassinations.²²⁰ Although Harald appears to be in charge, the level of chaos that ensues reveals that he lacks the authority to control his wild sons. His descendent Harald Hardradi also faces challenges in maintaining his sovereignty over his territory. However, through his brutal suppression of rebellion and cunning political sense Harald Hardradi avoids the setback of his ancestor. A major part of Harald’s success is his perceptiveness. Given his suspicious nature, he is quick to respond to anything that appears to threaten his rule. When one of Harald’s rivals Einar Paunch-Shaker, a wealthy landed man from Trondelag begins to argue for the farmers in law courts and gather followers, Harald responds in keeping with his suspicious and dominate nature. He states,

“The stout chief is hoping
To fill the throne of Norway;
Even kings, I sometimes feel
Keep smaller courts than his.”²²¹

Here he reveals his jealousy and determination to remain in control. Harald further states,

²¹⁸ Snorri and Hollander, 87.

²¹⁹ Snorri and Hollander, 87–88.

²²⁰ Snorri and Hollander, 88.

²²¹ Sturluson, *King Harald’s Saga*, 92.

“Einar of the flailing sword
Will drive me from this country
Unless I first persuade him
To kiss my thin lipped axe.”²²²

Harald soon carries out his threats. His opportunity comes when Einar goes to court in the king’s hall to defend one of his men. Harald then closes all the shutters making the hall dark and when Einar steps inside, Harald’s men hack him to death.²²³ While this move does make Harald immensely unpopular with the farmers by defeating their leader, he has silenced all protest. The saga states, “After Einar’s death King Harald was so hated for this murder that only the lack of a leader to raise the standard prevented the landed men and farmers from doing battle with the king.”²²⁴ Although Harald’s actions do cause some trouble and conflict, they are ultimately successful in suppressing revolt. For example, Harald swiftly punishes the farmers of Romerike for failing to pay their taxes. The king’s poet Thjodolf states, “Flames cured the peasants of disloyalty to Harald.”²²⁵ Harald himself sums up his rule and brutal destruction of all those who oppose him. He states,

“Now I have caused the deaths of thirteen of my enemies;
I kill without compunction,
And remember all my killings.
Treason must be scorched

²²² Sturluson, 92.

²²³ Sturluson, 93.

²²⁴ Sturluson, 93.

²²⁵ Sturluson, 128.

By fair means or foul

Before it overwhelms me;

Oak-trees grow from acorns.”²²⁶

This chilling statement reveals Harald’s willingness to eliminate his opposition. This firm control over his own kingdom allows Harald to travel to England in order to attempt his final conquest. Harald’s descendant Magnús behaves in a similar way, crushing revolt and then traveling in search of conquest. Magnús’s first major opponents come in the form of rebels from among the followers of his deceased rival King Håkon. Magnus hunts them down trapping them in a fjord called Harm unable to flee his rivals surrender.²²⁷ Magnús promptly enacts justice the saga states, “Heard you have, how Magnús- hanged by his was Thórir- fast he fared against his foes-punished the traitors.”²²⁸ Magnús brutal crackdown allows him to claim sole control of Norway much in the same way that his grandfather Harald acted. Although Harald Fairhair spends much of the early part of his life conducting an extensive conquest of Norway, he gradually loses control and ends up struggling with the anarchy created by his sons. Harald Hardradi in contrast steps into a kingdom already under the control of his nephew Magnus. He then successfully holds on to this kingdom through violence and the brutal suppression of rebel leadership. Magnús in a somewhat similar situation to his ancestor Harald Fairhair must content with a rival for the throne. He successfully takes control and despite his premature death cements his lineage. For these kings control over their

²²⁶ Sturluson, 102.

²²⁷ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 670–73.

²²⁸ Snorri and Hollander, 674.

kingdom is an important feature of their masculinity and legacy as rulers. All of these kings are capable and willing to use violence to ensure their sovereignty. However, they also have other less violent methods at their disposal. While Harald Fairhair's conquest is mostly violent, he also uses outlawry to get rid of his enemies. When Ganger-Hrólf causes trouble for Harald raiding in Vík while Harald is there Harald promptly outlaws him ignoring protests from Hrólf's mother.²²⁹ Harald Hardradi also occasionally uses nonviolent methods. When faced with revolt in Trondheim Harald sends Finn Arnason to arrange peace.²³⁰ Although this attempt goes askew due in part to Harald's unyielding nature it is significant as it represents an attempt to suppress dissent through other methods besides violence. Fort building also served as an effective way to establish control. Magnús uses this method when he travels into Gautland territory under control of the Swedish king. The saga states that Magnús's men "...constructed a fort of turf and timbers and dug a ditch around it."²³¹ Although this fort eventually falls, it allows Magnús to assert his authority and to hold an area without actively waging war. As these examples illustrate sometimes methods that are more peaceful work well in establishing authority. With peaceful and un-peaceful methods, these kings all still actively work to reinforce their sovereignty. It is critical to their identities as men and kings. A king is no king without a kingdom to rule. Their obituaries within the sagas reflect the importance of firm control. The saga states about Harald Hardradi, "King Harald was a powerful king and ruled his kingdom firmly; he was so shrewd a man that it is generally agreed that

²²⁹ Snorri and Hollander, 79.

²³⁰ Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 91.

²³¹ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 678.

there was never a king in Scandinavia to match him in profound wisdom and acumen.”²³² Here Harald’s control and craftiness are praised he has established his legacy as a great king. About Magnús it states, “King Magnús had ruled Norway for ten years and in his days there was good peace in the land; But people had much labor and expense from his expeditions abroad. By his followers, King Magnús was greatly beloved but the farmers considered him stern.”²³³ Magnús gets a somewhat mixed reputation however as the saga asserts the fact remains that he has brought peace and stability.

The three Kings featured in this chapter, Harald Fairhair, Harald Hardradi, and Magnús Barelegs, all exhibit the three hallmarks of kingly masculinity to varying degrees. Both Harald Hardradi and Harald Fairhair successfully manage to combine victory in battle with generosity towards their followers. This assists them in maintaining their sovereignty. Magnús fails to reward his followers and as a result, his sovereignty is threatened. They possess strong warrior identity from an early age embarking on great conquests and demonstrating personal bravery in battle. These kings also possess great wealth in both land and gold they then use this wealth well rewarding their followers and attracting new alliances. Finally, these kings work to maintain their sovereignty they crush revolt and strengthen their kingdoms demonstrating their strength as rulers. However, issues like Harald Fairhair’s inability to control his sons and Magnús’s greed lead to problems with sovereignty. For the Scandinavian kings of the sagas, masculinity takes on a new role and importance; their expanded responsibilities as kings shape the

²³² Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga*, 86.

²³³ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 686.

way ideal masculinity manifests itself within their sagas. A king who fulfills his functions as a warrior, a generous leader, and a sovereign ruler is a king worthy of remembering.

These kings stand out for their success in these areas.

Conclusion

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

As the previous chapters have revealed the saga authors hold a vibrant and complex understanding of ideal masculinity. The heroes, outlaws, and kings of these sagas all act in ways that prove their masculinity to their followers and enemies. However, the presentation of ideal masculinity in the Legendary, Family, and Kings Sagas leave much room for comparison and contrast. Although their perspectives follow each other closely and find their base in the same mythological and religious context, it would be a mistake to argue that they present a completely unified picture of ideal masculinity. These three different saga genres each provide their own unique take on the various traits of ideal masculinity. This is due primarily to the difference between the central characters of these sagas. Three traits of ideal masculinity in particular are found in all three genres and provide the most opportunity for discussion: warrior prowess, wealth, and the fulfillment of obligations. Examining how these traits function across genres and social roles demonstrates the depth behind these traits and their complexity within the broader picture of Norse masculinity.

Warrior prowess appears as an ideal trait throughout all three of the different saga genres. Almost every male character in the nine sagas discussed engages in battle as a way to resolve disputes.²³⁴ Throughout the sagas two different types of warrior prowess appear.

²³⁴ Eriksen Stefka G., "The Role and Identity of the Warrior: Self Reflexction and Awareness in Old Norse Literary and Social Spaces.," n.d., 4.

The first version focuses on personal action in combat. Most often, found in the legendary and family sagas it also appears in the Kings Sagas. Warriors like Ragnar Lodbrok or Sigurd the Volsung face their enemies head on engaging in close combat. Outlaws like Grettir or Thormod and Thorgeir are notorious for doing this often-starting fight over petty issues. However, kings also behave this way; Harald charges his enemies at the battle of Stamford Bridge²³⁵ and his grandson Magnús dies fending off blows from his enemies.²³⁶ Personal action functions as one way to demonstrate warrior prowess. A warrior could also reinforce their reputation as a warrior by conducting battles and engaging in clever stratagems. For example, Harald Fairhair conducts many battles in his campaigns to conquer Norway. Although he most likely personally fought in battle, the saga emphasizes his role in directing the campaign. Ivar the Boneless stands as an excellent example of this type of warrior ability. Although his followers carry him on a stretcher due to his condition, he is just as much a warrior as his brothers. His clever strategies bring victory over difficult opponents such as King Ælle.²³⁷ The hero Bodvar behaves in a similar way when he transforms himself into a bear during battle. Hjalti even rebukes him for not fighting by King Hrolf's side. He fails to see Bodvar's true contribution to the fight something Hrolf recognizes.²³⁸ Here magic allows a warrior to demonstrate his prowess even when absent from the battlefield. These two types of

²³⁵ Snorri Sturluson, *King Harald's Saga* (Penguin UK, 2005), 152.

²³⁶ Snorri and Lee M. Hollander, *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin, Tex: Univ. of Texas Pre1995), 686.

²³⁷ Waggoner, *The Sagas of Ragnar Lodbrok*, 36.

²³⁸ Jesse L. Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (Penguin Books Limited, 1998), 74–5.

warrior prowess are not exclusive to one genre of saga. Rather they appear throughout the nine sagas spanning the different genres.

Another aspect of masculinity that offers opportunity for comparison and contrast is wealth. The characters of the nine sagas examined gain wealth primarily in three ways through raiding, violent political maneuvering, and in reward for great deeds. Raiding stands as by far the most common practice. Men from Harald Hardradi to the outlaws of *Grettir's Saga* use raiding as a vehicle to gather wealth. However, when there exists a set social and political hierarchy individuals will often turn this to their advantage. For example, the men of Vatnsdal use the Icelandic Thing system to outmaneuver their neighbors.²³⁹ Harald Fairhair takes advantage of his recent conquests and political restructuring to gain large tributes.²⁴⁰ The final way to gain wealth usually serves as the recourse of the lone champion. Grettir often completes great feats in return for rewards such as his famous saxe.²⁴¹ Svipdag in the *Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* moves from king to king doing great deeds in hopes of becoming their champion and earning rewards.

Another key difference between the sagas that revolves around wealth concerns the use of wealth. For kings in particular generosity takes on great importance. Their willingness to be generous with the wealth they have collected allows them to win important and skilled followers. Both Harald Fairhair and Harald Hardruler use generosity to their advantage. They hand out rewards to those loyal to them both to build alliances with new people and to reward loyal behavior. Hrolf Kraki also acquires a reputation for generosity

²³⁹ *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, World of the Sagas (New York: Viking, 2000).

²⁴⁰ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*.

²⁴¹ *Grettir's Saga* (OUP Oxford, 2009), 64.

and it allows him to gather his berserkers for his battle with Adlis.²⁴² In contrast to their generosity, Magnús Barelegs hoards his wealth for himself and betrays his loyal followers in pursuit of new lands. As a result, his lack of loyal followers leads to his abandonment on the battlefield.²⁴³ Wealth and the proper use of it stand as an important part of proper masculinity. Kings in particular must demonstrate their generosity to their followers.

The final point of comparison and contrast focuses on societal roles. The men from the nine sagas under discussion fall into three broad categories legendary heroes, farmers, and kings. These three groups each possess their own unique obligations and concerns. For the legendary heroes their main obligations center on completing special tasks that ordinary men cannot. For example, Sigurd's slaying of Fafnir or Ragnar's killing of the giant snake. Their motives behind the completion of these feats stem from basic human impulses such as revenge or the pursuit of glory. These heroes are larger than life and as a result, their mistakes can lead to greater consequences. For example, Hrolf Kraki's refusal of the weapons provided by the farmer Hrani, actually Odin in disguise an arrogant action that leads to his defeat in battle and eventual death.²⁴⁴ The legendary hero type appears most often in the legendary sagas and the Family Sagas. Although Grettir appears in the Icelandic Family, sagas he takes on the role of a folk hero. He performs great deeds such as destroying the monstrous Glam.²⁴⁵ In contrast to the feats of the

²⁴² Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 61.

²⁴³ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 686.

²⁴⁴ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 68–69.

²⁴⁵ *Grettir's Saga*, 102.

legendary heroes, the farmers have concerns that are more domestic in nature. The farmers strive to remain in good standing among their neighbors avoiding conflict with powerful figures such as kings. Their battles often revolve around land and food sources. For example, in *Grettir's Saga* a battle breaks out between the men of Kaldbak and the men of Vik over a beached whale that drifted ashore during a time of famine.²⁴⁶ The men of Vatnsdal start numerous fights over land and fishing rights. The majority of settlers to Iceland are farmers who fled when Harald Fairhair took power, fearing the loss of their lands. These men are less concerned with earning glory and more focused on having enough food to eat. The final group under discussion the kings possess a very different set of concerns. The kings must remain vigilant to maintain their sovereignty over their often-unruly subjects. These kings use alliances, generosity, and even brute force to maintain their hold. Harald Hardradi's brutal suppression of rebellion falls firmly under this umbrella. Magnús starts out his reign by crushing the rebels who stood for his short-lived rival Hákon.²⁴⁷ The ability of the individuals within these three groups to fulfill their obligations and to conquer their obstacles connects to their masculinity. Norse masculinity focuses on actions and these men demonstrate their masculinity through the skill with which they overcome these difficulties.

The many warriors, farmers, outlaws, heroes, and kings that inhabit the world of the Icelandic sagas demonstrate their masculinity through their actions. The picture of ideal masculinity presented stems from a compilation of various traits. Attributes from warrior prowess to wisdom play an important role in defining Norse masculinity. These traits

²⁴⁶ *Grettir's Saga*, 29–30.

²⁴⁷ Snorri and Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 670.

change based on the genre of saga and the social role of the individual involved. In the Legendary Sagas, heroes are larger than life with masculine attributes like warrior prowess, courage, wisdom, honor, and wealth. While in the Family Sagas the farmers and outlaws of Iceland struggle to thrive in completion with their neighbors and the environment. The ideal traits emphasized are warrior prowess, courage, great deeds, and wealth. In contrast, the King's Sagas focus on the lives of royalty. The ideal traits for kings are warrior prowess, wealth, and sovereignty. The emphasis on sovereignty reflects their additional responsibilities as rulers. Throughout these lists warrior prowess sits at the top. Every one of the central characters of these sagas engages in combat as a way to resolve conflicts.²⁴⁸ Their warrior identity sits central in their ideology of masculinity. The Icelandic sagas reveal a nuanced and complex conception of masculinity. Far from simple, this masculinity illustrates the depth and value of Norse culture and saga literature. The endurance of Norse masculinity through the ages stands as a testament to the strength of the ideals of the saga writers. Whether stories of heroes on epic quests to defeat supernatural monsters or histories of emerging kings building their nations. The many narratives that became Icelandic saga literature forged a masculinity and a warrior culture that terrorized Europe with its brutal Viking raids, inspired explores, and founded nations. They created a legacy that, "...will not be forgotten as long as the world remains inhabited."²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Eriksen Stefka G., "The Role and Identity of the Warrior: Self Reflection and Awareness in Old Norse Literary and Social Spaces.," 6–7.

²⁴⁹ Byock, *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, 31.

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