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Silver, Ships and Soil: Gift-Giving in Medieval Icelandic Sagas

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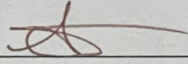
Silver, Ships and Soil: Gift-Giving in Medieval Icelandic Sagas

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
William & Mary

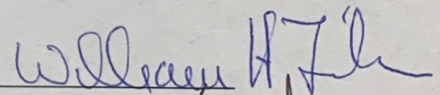
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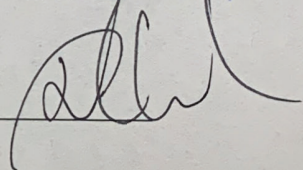
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Silver, Ships and Soil: Gift-Giving in Medieval Icelandic Sagas

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Senior Honors in Anthropology

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April 17, 2022

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[Kari] and Ulf shared all they owned and were close friends.

- *Egil's Saga*

1. Introduction

The island of Iceland has fascinated humanity since its discovery. A land of volcanoes and valleys, of glaciers and fertile soil, Iceland remained untouched by mankind until the 9th century CE. Archaeological evidence suggests medieval Scandinavians first settled the island.¹ A people without a writing system, these settlers used oral tradition to preserve in community memory their laws, legends and lineages. Many centuries later, after Christianity brought written language to the region, Icelanders began to write these stories down, composing pieces of rich prose which still captivate audiences today.

I read a few of these medieval Icelandic sagas for the first time in an English class here at William & Mary. I enjoyed the tales of outlaws and other-than-human beings set against the backdrop of a newly-discovered land, but I found myself especially drawn to the detailed descriptions of everyday social practice. Interested in learning academic thought on this preserved social structure, I turned to anthropological databases. A few studies proved inspirational, such as Dr. Pragya Vohra's work in reconstructing migrant identity through the Icelandic *Grágás* and Dr. Jesse Byock's portrayal of the saga narrators' social memory.² Other studies on the Icelandic sagas drew heavily on Mauss and Marx to discuss the movement of goods in creating personhood, memory and power.³ However, my time in the W&M

Anthropology department exposed me to more theorists than just Mauss. I decided that I would

¹ Bolender, Douglas L., John M. Steinberg, and E. Paul Durrenberger. "Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement Patterns and the Development of Social Inequality in Northern Iceland." In *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape*: 217.; Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, edited by Peter Sawyer, 110-133. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001: 123.

² Byock, Jesse. "Social Memory and the Sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 299-316. EBSCOhost (1734045); Vohra, Pragya. "One of us? Negotiating multiple legal identities across the Viking diaspora." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 2 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1105998>.

³ Barreiro, Santiago. 2021. "Personal Memory, Family Memory, Collective Memory? The Parting Gifts in Egils Saga, Chapter 61"; Durrenberger, E. Paul. "Chiefly Consumption in Commonwealth Iceland"; Klevnäs, Alison Margaret. "'Imbued with the Essence of the Owner': Personhood and Possessions in the Reopening and Reworking of Viking-Age Burials"; Lund, Julie. "Connectedness with Things. Animated Objects of Viking Age Scandinavia and Early Medieval Europe."

complete my own research on gift exchange in the Icelandic sagas and, by applying more anthropological theorists to their scenes of daily life, create a new perspective of these stories and their narrators.

I ran into several bumps when learning how to approach this topic. Studying the Icelandic sagas ethnographically proved a unique challenge. Unlike other anthropological research I had been assigned in college, I could not talk to the subjects directly. Additionally, the narrators of the sagas lived centuries after their subject matter, yet their work makes the only written record of 9th-11th century Iceland. How could I accurately study a group of people whose only description was most likely riddled with unavoidable bias and falsehoods? I had to rethink my approach; I had to study these texts as a production of historical narrative rather than as historical truth.⁴

The narrators of the Icelandic sagas held the power to produce the history of medieval Iceland. Although they based their work on oral traditions which also produced history, the narrators' manuscripts recorded a final version of a collective memory, thus creating fact. They decided what timeframe constituted Iceland's long-ago-and-far-away past, which events marked social change, and, perhaps most importantly, which accounts would be excluded.⁵ The narrators also had contemporary cause to shape the historical narrative to their liking. Living during an age of unprecedented power-grabbing Icelandic leaders and Norwegian royal interest in the island's affairs, the narrators used these traditional stories to create a national foundation myth which praised Icelandic strength and independence against foreign influence.⁶ In the hands of the

⁴ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. "Preface." Preface to *Silencing the Past*, xxi-xxiii. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015: xxiii.

⁵ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. "The Power in the Story." In *Silencing the Past*, 1-30. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015: 16.

⁶ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*, 150-55. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2016: 150.

narrators, the sagas transformed into evidence of medieval Icelandic social memory.⁷ When studying the social structure of the people in these texts, one is not studying how society was but how certain groups wanted that past society to be remembered.

With the influence of the narrators in mind, I changed my research question. Instead of asking “what do scenes of gift exchange in these sagas reveal about the social structure of 9th century Icelandic society,” I rephrased the question to: “how do scenes of gift exchange in these sagas reveal the narrators’ perception of a past Iceland?” With this new approach, my research steers away from analyzing the accuracy of portrayed social structure and instead analyzes the portrayed social structure as is; for example, the character Aud is not analyzed as a medieval Icelandic woman but rather as a gendered being who reflects the values of her storytellers.

I chose to analyze three sagas in this manner: *Egil’s Saga*, *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, and *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. I chose to read these three of the *Íslendinga sögur*, the “family sagas” (named for their focus on two to three generations of one family), because they all boast comparable narrators and settings, yet each contains unique instances of gift exchange. The three sagas share a setting: Norway and Iceland in roughly the 9th through 11th centuries CE. These three central families share a space in the imagined past, making comparisons between the three stories feasible.⁸ These three sagas also come from similar narrators, although their individual identities have been lost to time. As stated before, manuscript dating tells us the sagas were written down during a period when infighting rocked Iceland and Christianity influenced the creation of written materials.⁹ The seamless similarities and overlap of characters and events

⁷ Byock, Jesse. "Social Memory and the Sagas." *Scandinavian Studies* 76, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 299-316. EBSCOhost (1734045): 300. Byock defines social memory as “the process by which a society uses its past in giving its present form and meaning” (p. 300).

⁸ "A Note on the Texts." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, lviii-lxvi. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: lxi-lxiv.

⁹ "Introduction." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, xv-liv. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: xlvii.

portrayed in the sagas indicates that the narrators of each saga were aware of each other's work and intentionally wrote to match.¹⁰ This cohesion of the saga world allows for events to be easily compared, making these sagas perfect to study as a group.

In addition to their shared setting and narrators, I chose to include all three because each contains unique portrayals of gift exchange. *Gisli Sursson's Saga* depicts the dissolution of a family through instances of failed exchange, most notably a failed ritual of sworn brotherhood. Gift exchange in *Egil's Saga*, the most political of the stories, occurs mainly within the civic sphere as Harald Finehair attempts to carve the role of king into Norway's existing social structure. And in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* the rules surrounding land ownership and death compensation (both achieved through gift exchange) change as the population in Iceland develops their own ways of defining social structure. In bringing together their different forms of gift exchange, these three sagas paint a more complete picture of the narrators' perception of medieval Iceland.

Finally, a note on the translations. While learning the basics of medieval Icelandic is on my bucket list, I could not feasibly do so for this project. I instead turned to the most recent peer-reviewed translations of the sagas available, the work of Bernard Scudder and Martin S. Regal. The aim of their work is "to produce accurate and readable modern English versions of the original texts" and "to reflect the homogeneity of the saga world ... by means of a co-ordinated translation of key vocabulary, concepts, and phrases."¹¹ My analysis of gift exchange relies more on the presence of ideas than the words for them; for example, I care more

¹⁰ "A Note on the Texts." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, lviii-lxvi. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: lxi-lxiv.

¹¹ "A Note on the Texts." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: lxiv.

that a possessive exists in the phrase “his money” than I do the exact wording.¹² However, researchers conducting more extensive and professional exploration into this topic should consider performing their own translation work, at least to some degree.

2. Historical Context

These three Icelandic sagas cannot be studied without first being placed in the historical contexts of Iceland and of their narrators. As stated in the introduction, all three stories take place both in Norway and in Iceland during the period of Scandinavian expansion, which is defined by scholars as from the late 8th century (a common starting date being the infamous raid on Lindisfarne, England in 793 CE) through the early 11th century.¹³ These tales existed as oral traditions before being written down during Iceland’s transition from a stateless population to a Norwegian colony.¹⁴ The sagas’ Christian narrators combined their own struggles with the contemporary Norwegian king with these stories of heroes to form an anti-monarchical Icelandic foundation myth, where persecuted Norwegian landowners found refuge in Iceland and maintained a proud identity separate from the crown.¹⁵ Discussing the history of Iceland’s inhabitants and the history of the texts themselves establishes the context necessary for further analysis of the narrators’ work.

¹² "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 532. See my section “Silver for a Life” for the analysis of this phrase.

¹³ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, xv-liv. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: xvii. Scholars define the boundaries “the Viking Age” differently; some, like Richard Hall (see bibliography) define the period of Scandinavian expansion as the 8th-13th centuries CE.

¹⁴ Kellogg, Robert. “Introduction.” Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xvii.

¹⁵ Kellogg, Robert. “Introduction.” Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlvii.

2.1. Medieval Iceland

Our evidence for life in Iceland before the introduction of writing comes from few archaeological finds and texts created contemporary to the sagas' manuscripts; therefore, our knowledge of pre-Christian Iceland is largely a piecemeal and intentionally-constructed historical narrative.¹⁶ However, it is better to know this narrative of medieval Iceland than to study the texts in ignorance. The *Íslendingabók*, a history of Iceland written contemporaneously to the sagas dates the first wave of Icelandic settlement to 870 CE.¹⁷ Irish annals claim small groups of Irish Christians settled on the island earlier, but no archaeological evidence currently supports these accounts.¹⁸ While the sagas focus on the Scandinavian settlers who came from Norway, some Scandinavians did emigrate from Ireland and Great Britain as well.¹⁹ A text called the *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements) lists the supposed original settlers by household; it proclaims roughly 400 households settled in Iceland in the sixty years after initial contact.²⁰ Earlier versions of the *Landnámabók* support the sagas in claiming that the tyranny of King Harald Finehair caused many of the settlers to seek political refuge in Iceland.²¹

Scholars do not agree on whether King Harald Finehair was the main reason so many traveled west to Iceland. Some claim his growing power was a factor in the emigration.²² Others believe his reign (he lived c. 860-930 CE) occurred too late to have been a factor, and that

¹⁶ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. "Preface." Preface to *Silencing the Past*: xxiii. ; Vesteinsson, Orri. "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Prehistory." *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 11.

¹⁷ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*, 150-55. New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2016: 150.

¹⁸ Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 123. ; Vesteinsson, Orri. "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Prehistory." *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 4.

¹⁹ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 151.

²⁰ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 151.; Bolender, Douglas L., John M. Steinberg, and E. Paul Durrenberger. "Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement Patterns and the Development of Social Inequality in Northern Iceland." In *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape*: 219.

²¹ Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 112.

²² Durrenberger, E. Paul, and Suzan Erem. "Stratification without a State: Medieval Iceland." In *Anthropology Unbound: A Field Guide to the 21st Century*, 3rd ed., 85-96. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016: 85. ; Kellog, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlvii.

actually increasing Norwegian interference in Iceland during the sagas' transcription caused narrators to connect King Harald to Iceland's formation myth as an antagonist.²³ Even if his direct involvement in Norwegian migration to Iceland can be debated, King Harald's powerful reign likely did cast a shadow over the first generations in Iceland.

We know those who immigrated to Iceland were wealthy because they could afford ships to transport themselves, their livestock and their household (the family unit and slaves).²⁴ These chieftains and wealthy farmers divided up the fertile land in the highlands and began their new lives.²⁵ After some self-governance trial and error, the people of Iceland created the Althing, an annual gathering of local court systems which served as legislative and judicial authority.²⁶ The Althing also served a social function, bringing people across the island together to reinforce and create relationships.²⁷ Iceland's Althing was unique from other medieval European governmental systems in that it had no executive branch. No executive authority meant, according to anthropologists, that medieval Iceland lacked a state; the settlers used a governing body to create laws and judicial decisions concerning stratification yet the task of enforcement was left up to individuals.²⁸ Because of this lack of state, as seen in the sagas, households with land and with power could and would take the law into their own hands.

²³ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 151. ; Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 112.

²⁴ Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 118. ; Vesteinsson, Orri. "Patterns of Settlement in Iceland: A Study in Prehistory." *Saga-Book* 25 (1998): 12.

²⁵ Durrenberger, E. Paul, and Suzan Erem. "Stratification without a State: Medieval Iceland." In *Anthropology Unbound: A Field Guide to the 21st Century*: 85.; Bolender, Douglas L., John M. Steinberg, and E. Paul Durrenberger. "Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement Patterns and the Development of Social Inequality in Northern Iceland." In *Economics and the Transformation of Landscape*: 218.

²⁶ Kellog, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlv. The Althing was led by godis, religious leaders who over time were looked to for secular leadership. Thirty-nine godis facilitated courts across Iceland and they met at the Althing to make national decisions.

²⁷ "Social, Political and Legal Structure." In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 241-46. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005: 242.

²⁸ Durrenberger, E. Paul, and Suzan Erem. "Stratification without a State: Medieval Iceland." In *Anthropology Unbound: A Field Guide to the 21st Century*: 85.

Access to labor was the limiting factor of power in Iceland until natural causes moved the good soil to the lowlands; then, seasonal wage labor became the norm and land became the limiting factor. Iceland's lack of a state allowed a few influential families to amass land monopolies and power, causing an uptick in violence in the 1220s; this period in Iceland is now known as the Age of the Sturlungs, named after one of the most powerful families.²⁹ Families like the Sturlungs grew closer with Norwegian royalty and somewhere in 1262-4, Iceland became a colony of the Norwegian crown.³⁰ While this political transition saved Iceland from complete dissolution, not all Icelanders supported the change, as evidenced by how the sagas and texts produced around this time are rife with anti-monarchical sentiments.

We are lucky to have so many texts from medieval Iceland because much archaeological evidence from the period of Iceland's settlement has been lost to time. Archaeologists have found traces of about twenty farms from before the year 1000 CE, but because of the sagas we know many more farms existed during that time.³¹ Although archaeologists have expressed concern with relying too heavily on the sagas for evidence (due to their centuries-later narrators), the sagas' textual evidence has been used to hesitantly place social context onto Icelandic archaeological finds.³² In this essay, we will use the sagas as the archaeologists have done; while we should be cautious of believing the text's details word-for-word, we can use scenes of gift exchange to make educated inferences about value and power and relationships.

²⁹ Durrenberger, E. Paul, and Suzan Erem. "Stratification without a State: Medieval Iceland." In *Anthropology Unbound: A Field Guide to the 21st Century*: 90-91.; Bolender, Douglas L., John M. Steinberg, and E. Paul Durrenberger. "Unsettled Landscapes: Settlement Patterns and the Development of Social Inequality in Northern Iceland." In *Economies and the Transformation of Landscape*: 219.

³⁰ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlviii.

³¹ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 154-155.

³² Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 122.

2.2. The Sagas as Stories

Around forty sagas set in medieval Iceland during the period of Scandinavian expansion survive to this day; the three sagas analyzed in this essay are part of this collection.³³ These stories are unique from other contemporary medieval literature in that they were created by the discussed group (albeit Christianized descendents), they portray a variety of social groups in a precise context, and they were written in prose instead of verse.³⁴ Unlike the medieval romance and epic genres, which spin spiritual and emotional stories of royalty, the court, and the semi-divine, the Icelandic sagas portray everyday people with relatable, secular issues.³⁵ Strip away the medieval context and these stories could occur in a modern setting: Gisli could still be torn between familial loyalties, Egil could still anger a political leader, Grettir could still be punished for acting in a self-serving manner. The modern reader can relate to the protagonists because we can see these plotlines play out in our own lives, even with centuries and a cultural difference between us and the narrators.

The three sagas discussed in this essay fall into a grouping called the *Íslendinga sögur*, translated as the “sagas of Icelanders” or “family sagas.”³⁶ Each of the sagas in this category follow multiple generations of a family in their political navigation of the homeland (Norway), their formation of a new society (Iceland), and their eventual expansion (Greenland, Vinland, the Mediterranean, or even back to Norway). Sagas in the *Íslendinga sögur* typically begin with a detailed description of the setting; after genealogy and geographical placement are established, the hero’s family goes through the conflicts and peace-making necessary for the birth of the main

³³ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlviii.

³⁴ Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn. "The Atlantic Islands." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 114. ; Smiley, Jane. "Preface." Preface to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, ix-xiv. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: x.

³⁵ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlviii.

³⁶ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xlviii.

hero, often a few generations after having settled in Iceland.³⁷ Scholars have remarked that this attention to pre-protagonist genealogy and geography implies the stories' original intended use, both as collective memory and as entertainment.³⁸

Although each saga in the *Íslendinga sögur* features a different protagonist with a unique plotline, each main character is similar in that their relationships with others drive their adventures. Each man is “drawn into the plots through the operation of social laws over which they have little individual control.”³⁹ These men are not the protagonists because they successfully reinforce their roles in Icelandic society (husband, father, son, farmer, neighbor, politician, etc); instead, the ways in which they fail to fit these roles makes them protagonists worth hearing about. If Grettir had good relationships with his kin and with strangers, he would not have traveled the fringes of Icelandic society and fought other-than-human beings. If Egil had treated those close to the Norwegian crown with kindness even after facing insult, he would not have played a thrilling game of cat-and-mouse with royalty around the Norwegian Sea. Gisli's fate, as I argue in the section titled “Blood and Earth” may have been predestined by his relatives; still, it can be argued that his fatal conflicts with his own kin make him a kinsman worth hearing about. The *Íslendinga sögur* highlight these tales of men who contradict social cohesion because the unusual provokes a reaction from the audience. These stories balance social memory with headstrong protagonists to create a picture of a wild and independent medieval Iceland.

³⁷ "A Note on the Texts." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, lviii-lxvi. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: lix.; Byock, Jesse. "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of Egils Saga." *Scandinavian Studies*: 303.

³⁸ Byock, Jesse. "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of Egils Saga." *Scandinavian Studies*: 300-301.; Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 155. ; Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xxxv.

³⁹ Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xl.

2.3. The Narrators

The conversion of Iceland to Christianity in 1000 CE brought literacy and manuscript creation to Scandinavia.⁴⁰ Christians from other countries had written about the Scandinavian expansion since the 8th century, but these accounts were outsider perspectives of Scandinavian society. The sagas and texts such as the *Landnámabók* represent the Icelanders' first attempts at recording their own history.⁴¹ The individual creators of these manuscripts and the materials which affected their storytelling (contemporary events, other literary sources, oral traditions, etc) remain largely unknown, mostly because the only surviving manuscripts are copies.⁴² Of all Icelandic texts before the 16th century, only two narrators are known: Snorri Sturlson, a 13th century Icelandic chieftain and Saxo Grammaticus, a Danish cleric.⁴³ Only one manuscript from one of the three sagas discussed here, the *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.) containing *Egil's Saga*, could maybe be attributed to a narrator, Snorri.⁴⁴ There's simply too much about the Icelandic sagas that we will never know: who copied down the texts, what specific sources influenced their work, and the extent to which they changed oral tradition to fit their purposes.

In fact, we only know that the narrators even used oral tradition to form these stories (and therefore we only know that the stories can be tied to a non-literate, non-Christian tradition) because of small amounts of scattered evidence across the manuscripts, including the hundreds of proverbial sayings in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* and the sources of oral tradition cited in

⁴⁰ Hall, Richard. "The Settlement of Iceland." In *The World of the Vikings*: 166.

⁴¹ Byock, Jesse. "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of Egils Saga." *Scandinavian Studies*: 314.; Lönnroth, Lars. "The Vikings in History and Legend." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, edited by Peter Sawyer, 225-49. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001: 225.

⁴² Smiley, Jane. "Preface." Preface to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xii.

⁴³ Lönnroth, Lars. "The Vikings in History and Legend." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*: 227.

⁴⁴ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, 3-184. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: 7.

the *Íslendingabók*.⁴⁵ These ties to an oral tradition exist alongside a few blatantly Christian references, such as Egil being “sprinkled with water” at birth.⁴⁶ Because we can only tie a few details like these to Christian and pre-Christian traditions, we cannot prove how much of the rich societal detail in these texts was not a Christian narrator’s invention or perception. I use the word “narrator” to describe the manuscripts’ creators because the term acknowledges the writers’ role in shaping these stories which at their core originated from another source.

3. Analysis of Exchange in the Sagas

Now that the historical context behind the sagas has been explored, we can analyze some examples of gift exchange and their consequences. As much as I would love to discuss in depth every instance of exchange in these sagas, the amount in just these three stories would turn my analysis into a book. Instead, I have chosen to analyze just a few scenes of exchange from each saga. Because each saga covers many generations, not every scene that I have selected involves the protagonist. I tried to pick scenes which together depict different social roles engaging in exchange: protagonists, antagonists, ancestors, mothers, sons, kings, chieftains, and outlaws, to name a few. I also selected scenes which are unique in terms of the type of exchange described. My goal is to provide the reader with a wide breadth of the gift exchange which occurs within these three sagas. The sheer amount of textual evidence for gift exchange in these sagas implies that this topic is worth further research.

I have grouped the scenes I discuss into a few subgroups: “Gifting Gone Right,” “Gifting Gone Wrong,” and “Compensation and Purchase.” “Gifting Gone Right” and “Gifting Gone Wrong” are self-explanatory. Analyzing successful, completed gift exchanges shows the intended

⁴⁵ "Introduction." In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, ix-xxxviii. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005: xx. ; Kellogg, Robert. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: xxiii.

⁴⁶ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 51.

social consequences of exchange, while analyzing instances where gifting fails reveals what the narrators understood to be at risk. "Compensation and Purchase" contains scenes which discuss money, the determined value of a life, and implications of justice. These three categories combined provide an overview of what types of exchange the narrators emphasize as important to the development of Iceland. This is not to say that exchanges such as dowries in marital alliances were not important to Iceland's beginnings.⁴⁷ However, I chose to focus on scenes in which the exchange was described in heavy detail or created severe consequences for the characters.

Before diving into analysis, a few key terms must be defined. As this paper is anthropological, I feel it necessary to provide the reader with a quick explanation of conceptual words which will be used heavily in this section. These definitions are meant to provide the reader with a brief glimpse into the anthropological concept; the detail of anthropological thought on each will be explored as each term comes up in the analysis.

Gift: a material item or good given to another. The exchange of gifts between parties creates and reinforces their social relationship.⁴⁸

Value: the worth placed upon a thing or service. Value is socially constructed; nothing intrinsically has value, and the same good or service may not have the same value across cultures (value is not fixed).⁴⁹ There are many ways to determine value: some examples include usefulness, prestige, and labor.

⁴⁷ "Glossary." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, 741-58. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: 744. Dowries were regularly provided as part of marriage, according to the sagas.

⁴⁸ Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*: 87.

⁴⁹ Sahlins, Marshall. "Exchange Value and the Diplomacy of Primitive Trade." In *Stone Age Economics*: 261.

Exchange: the act of giving and receiving goods or services in order to create and reinforce a social connection. Parties rarely exchange simply for utilitarian purposes.⁵⁰ Frequent exchange of the same goods or services generates a rate of exchange.⁵¹

Reciprocity: “the action and reaction of two parties” engaged in exchange.⁵² Socially-distant parties place importance on reciprocity occurring in a timely manner with items of equal value (balanced reciprocity). Parties form stronger relationships through reciprocity not stipulated by time or balanced value (generalized reciprocity).⁵³ A force tied to social prestige can compel parties to reciprocate a gift, thus completing reciprocity.⁵⁴

Money: something of no value used to compare things of value (goods or services).⁵⁵ Money can act as a placeholder for value in exchange.⁵⁶ Coinage is money, but money is not always coinage.⁵⁷

Kinship: a network of social relationships connected by mutuality of being.⁵⁸ Kin are “persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence.”⁵⁹ Kinship can be created socially through the continuous exchange of substances, for example food and gold.⁶⁰

⁵⁰ Graeber, David. "The Myth of Barter." In *Debt: The First 5000 Years*: 25-29.

⁵¹ Sahlins, Marshall. "Exchange Value and the Diplomacy of Primitive Trade." In *Stone Age Economics*: 261-262.

⁵² Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 170.

⁵³ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 175-176.

⁵⁴ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 58 and 64.

⁵⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 209.

⁵⁶ Graeber, David. "The Myth of Barter." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 39.

⁵⁷ Graeber, David. "The Myth of Barter." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 41.

⁵⁸ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 20.

⁵⁹ Sahlins, Marshall. "Preface." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: ix.

⁶⁰ Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf." *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2020): 435-61. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.3.04>: 441.

3.1. Gifting Gone Right

And so the analysis begins. Gifting Gone Right allows the reader to see what constitutes a successful exchange in the sagas. This section highlights two scenes portraying gift exchange: the gift of a family heirloom from Grettir's mother to him in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, and King Harald's redistribution of wealth in *Egil's Saga*. The former scene provides an example of gift exchange within the family unit and exemplifies how exchange can be used to reinforce kinship roles. The latter scene shows how gift exchange is closely tied with the rise of King Harald's monarchy and its resulting power redistribution. The two examples, one of exchange within a kinship group and the other of exchange between, work together to portray how the narrators perceived gift exchange to affect social relations in long-ago Iceland.

3.1.1. The Gift of a Sword (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*)

Ironically, the first example of gifting gone right starts with tragedy. Grettir, the protagonist of the aptly-named *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* is born in Iceland to Asmund and Asdis, descendants of Iceland's first wave of settlers. Grettir proves to be an unruly soul; a youth prone to trouble, he kills a man over a bag of food and is sentenced to three years as an outlaw.⁶¹ His father Asmund refuses to provide him aid:

Asmund refused to give Grettir anything for the journey except provisions and a little homespun cloth. Grettir asked his father to give him a weapon. "You've never done

⁶¹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, edited by Örnólfur Thorsson, 1-208. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005: 31 and 243-44. An outlaw would be given either a lesser or full sentence. A lesser outlaw would be treated leniently and only had to leave Iceland for three years, often with passage and material support provided by the community. A full outlaw was one who the community would not help leave Iceland. Stuck in Iceland, he would (theoretically) be denied any aid and was confined to the wilderness of the island.

anything I've told you. And I don't know what useful thing you would do with weapons, so I won't give you any." ... *The father and son parted with little love lost between them.*⁶²

Asmund refuses to provide Grettir with a weapon because he believes Grettir has "never done anything" asked of him, and is therefore undeserving of a gift like a weapon. Grettir, from his father's perspective, has not sufficiently put enough "generalized reciprocity" into their relationship to warrant a gift of equal value. Coined by Sahlins, generalized reciprocity is the category of exchange between those who are socially close, often close to the level of kin.⁶³ Sahlins notes that within generalized reciprocity, one does not expect a balanced exchange; instead, parties give what they can to each other when they can, for the reinforcement of the bond through these gifts is more important to each party than an exactly-equal exchange.⁶⁴ Grettir's lack of acting in his father's interests has caused their kinship bond to weaken over time.

Although Asmund measures the strength of their relationship by reciprocity, he does not state that their relationship formed from this reciprocity. He always acknowledges Grettir as kin and as his son and continues to do so during Grettir's outlawry, implying that their relationship is not rooted in shared kinship substances and instead is rooted in their perception of procreation.⁶⁵ Although their relationship as kin cannot be dissolved by Grettir's lack of responsibility, Asmund implies that their bond can't only be sustained by the fact that they are kin. By stating "you've never done anything I've told you " as a reason for why Grettir does not deserve a sword, Asmund reminds Grettir harshly that gifts do not come from nothing.

⁶² "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 33.

⁶³ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*, 168-58. New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2017: 178.

⁶⁴ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 175.

⁶⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*, 1-61. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013: 2.

What should Grettir have given to his father over time in order to reinforce their bond?

This scene does not provide that clarification. However, other healthy father-son relationships in the sagas can provide some examples. Skallagrim, father of Egil in *Egil's Saga*, refuses land from King Harald because he respects his father so much that he “do[esn't] want to be a landholder while [his] father is alive.”⁶⁶ Thorodd, a minor character in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, loses his life to pursue the correct amount of timber his father, Thorgrim, is owed from Norwegian traders.⁶⁷ Although extreme examples, these sons maintain good relationships with their fathers by acting in favor of their fathers' interests. Their actions serve as a form of kinship substance; in acting to the benefit of his father, a son adds to his father's social and material prosperity. This providing for one's father reinforces the father and thus reinforces the father-son relationship.⁶⁸

These examples of strong father-son relationships show the narrators' perceptions of male kinship in medieval Iceland. Through completing actions and favors for the benefit of the father, a son reinforces their relationship and also reinforces his own gendered role as a son: a good son, in the case of the sagas, is a male who provides for his father.⁶⁹ Grettir, in failing to provide for his father, does not become something other than a son, but he also does not deserve the benefit of gifts that good sons can expect. The two “part with little love lost between them,” but they still part as father and son.⁷⁰

Grettir's mother, Asdis, is more sympathetic to her son's plight. She offers him the weapon his father denied him:

⁶⁶ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 12.

⁶⁷ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, Deluxe ed., edited by Örnólfur Thorsson and Bernard Scudder, 496-557. N.p.: Penguin Books, 2001: 507.

⁶⁸ Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf." *Cultural Anthropology* 35, no. 3 (2020): 435-61. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.3.04>: 453.

⁶⁹ Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, 157-210. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1975: 179-180.

⁷⁰ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 33.

*"You haven't been sent on your way as well equipped as I would like to see someone of your standing, my son," [his mother] told him before they parted. "What I think you lack most is a useful weapon. Something tells me you will be needing one." Then she took an inlaid sword from under her cloak, a fine piece of workmanship. "This sword belonged to my grandfather Jokul and the most prominent people of the Vatnsdal clan and it brought them many triumphs. I want to give you this sword. Make good use of it."*⁷¹

Asdis provides her son with a weapon of great value, both in its material makeup and in the family history imbued in the object; the value of this sword comes from the history and power imbued within it which transfers to the possessor, just like the Mauss theorizes about certain gifts among the Haïda and Trobrianders.⁷² Graeber would take Mauss's idea one step further and theorize that the sword's value comes from its past actions which are imbued into its identity.⁷³ Based on how sons are defined by their service to their fathers, Grettir must have provided his mother with a good amount of generalized reciprocity in order to deserve a gift of this value. However, the saga does not mention the relationship between Grettir and his mother prior to this scene. So why would she provide him a sword of such value?

Asdis supports Grettir in a similar manner to how the few female characters in the sagas support their male relatives, serving as mothers and wives who provide for the wellbeing of their male kin. Aud in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, whose actions are discussed in the section titled "Silver for a Life," aids her outlaw husband by refusing to give up his location, even when presented with many silver coins.⁷⁴ In the same saga, Thordis defends her brother Gisli by insulting his

⁷¹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 33.

⁷² Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*, 85-144. Chicago, IL: Hau Books, 2016: 135-143.

⁷³ Graeber, David. "Action and Reflection, or Notes toward a Theory of Wealth and Power." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, 91-116. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001: 105.

⁷⁴ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 548.

pursuers.⁷⁵ Sigrid, the wife of Egil from *Egil's Saga*, marches up to King Harald himself and attempts to negotiate peace between him and her husband.⁷⁶ Asdis is perhaps unique from these women in that she ignores one male in her family in favor of another; she disregards her husband's decision and supports her son with her own gift.

Asdis providing for Grettir makes her similar to these other women. However, her actions do not make her a woman; her actions towards her son make her a mother. People become gendered beings because of their actions and interactions with others.⁷⁷ In providing Grettir a sword without expecting anything in return, Asdis completes gendered labor and acts in a way which reinforces her role as a mother.⁷⁸ This act of giving to her child without reciprocation makes her a mother. What also makes Asdis a mother is that she is not a father; a father, as seen in Asmund's interaction with Grettir, expects generalized reciprocity to his benefit from his son over time. Asdis does not demand this obedience in return for a gift of equal value; if she did, her actions would reinforce her role as father. Through giving or denying a gift to one's sons, we see the creation and reinforcement of gendered parenthood.

Asdis's gendered labor as a mother is validated by another character; Grettir sets sail with a man named Haflidi, who "said it was obvious [from the fine sword] that she [Asdis] cared the most for him."⁷⁹ Other characters outside of the family recognizing Asdis's gift allows the wider community to also reinforce her role as mother. Although her act of giving was meant to create kinship within the family, her actions are not constrained to the small unit; her gift being used in the larger social sphere allows her reputation as mother to matter in a wider context.

⁷⁵ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 556.

⁷⁶ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 34.

⁷⁷ Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*: 169-177.

⁷⁸ Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf." 438.

⁷⁹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 34.

Grettir is grateful for his mother's gift. Before he leaves to begin his adventures as an outlaw, he and Asdis part on good terms:

*Grettir thanked her kindly for the gift, saying he thought it was better than any other gift, even much more valuable ones. Then he went on his way and Asdis wished him many good things.*⁸⁰

This gift exchange is a success; Grettir and Asdis part on a good note with their relationship and their roles within the kinship group reinforced. This scene exemplifies how successful gift-giving in these sagas, among its many other purposes, reinforces kinship and gendered roles; Grettir and his parents define themselves and their relationships to each other through varying expectations of gifts. This example is especially impactful because Grettir's failed exchange with his father occurs only sentences before, allowing the reader to see the contrast between how the Christianized narrators define a medieval Icelandic mother and father.

3.1.2. Dealings with King Harald (*Egil's Saga*)

As mentioned in the section discussing historical context, scholars debate the historical accuracy of the Norwegian King Harald's involvement in the immigration to Iceland.⁸¹ Regardless of the actual man's level of association with Iceland, his fictionalized character makes an appearance in each of these three sagas. His goal never changes: to unite all of Norway under one ruler, and he accomplishes this by making alliances to consolidate power and then using those relationships to go after his enemies.⁸² Early in *Egil's Saga*, Harald begins his climb

⁸⁰ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 33.

⁸¹ See footnotes in "Medieval Norway and Iceland."

⁸² Because of Roman and other global artifacts found in Scandinavia from before the 9th century CE, scholars believe powerful rulers and quasi-kingdoms operated in Scandinavia long before King Harald. However, no evidence supports a king before Harald's dynasty (Bagge, Sverre. *Cross & Scepter*: 12, 16-17.)

to power. He is noted to have “t[aken] over all the estates and all the land, habited or uninhabited,” and every citizen “was made to pay tribute to him.”⁸³ At this time, the protagonist Egil has not yet been born; however, his uncle, father and grandfather get caught up in King Harald’s zealous politics.

Thorolf, Egil’s uncle, proposes fostering the family’s connection to King Harald. He tries to convince his father Kveldulf, Egil’s grandfather, of the benefits their family could reap from loyalty to the crown:

*“I feel I will earn great honor from [King Harald]. ... I’m told that the king is very generous to his men and no less liberal in granting advancement and power to people he thinks worthy of it. ... Being neither his friend nor his enemy seems to me the most dishonorable course of all.”*⁸⁴

Through this statement, Thorolf reveals that King Harald’s generosity is conditional; one must be loyal to and selected by him in order to receive social rank and prosperity. If King Harald wasn’t as selective with his generosity, this type of exchange could be considered an example of Sahlins’ “pooling.” Defined as an exchange where goods are collected and then redistributed within a social group, pooling “stipulates a social center where goods meet and thence flow outwards.”⁸⁵ Through his forceful takeover of Norway’s land and implementation of a tribute system, King Harald attempts to situate himself as the “social center” from which wealth and influence flows.

However, Sahlins’ theory of pooling relies on “collective action,” united support and voluntary participation from the larger social group to maintain this system; therefore, King Harald goes against Sahlins’ theory due to his enforcement of the system onto his subjects and

⁸³ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 11.

⁸⁴ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 13.

⁸⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 170-171.

his use of the kingly “social center” as a tool for gaining the favor of a selective few as opposed to the social collective.⁸⁶ The narrator of *Egil's Saga* frames Harald's actions as unprecedented and selfish, calling the situation “tyranny” and portraying the king as a “surly” character who could not be trusted to act sociably.⁸⁷ In contrast, the narrator paints naive Thorolf and cautious Kveldulf, Egil's paternal line in Norway, as established men doing what has become necessary to maintain their livelihoods under a self-serving usurper.⁸⁸ Through contrasting the characters of King Harald and Egil's family, the narrator emphasizes and perhaps exaggerates a struggle between the old power traditions and new. The narrator implies that this new reconstruction of power in Norway is flawed because its creator is flawed, or perhaps vice versa. However, I would argue against the narrator's obvious bias and say that this new system which consolidates land and redistributes authority is not inherently bad; it is simply a transition.

King Harald facilitates this transition to centralized power because he is becoming the first king of Norway. In his rise to prominence, he is actively creating this new role of king and how to reinforce it. On this idea of creating a social role, Graeber noted that social structures, or any structures for that matter, are just patterns of action; social structures define how we act but at the same time are “the means” through which we reinforce and redefine both ourselves and the structure.⁸⁹ Based on Graeber's theory, Harald, in consolidating land and redistributing power, is defining the actions which the king should perform within the social structure.

However, because the preceding social structure of more localized power did not have this role, his actions clash against the social structure instead of reinforcing it. Such is the way of

⁸⁶ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 170.

⁸⁷ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 11-12.

⁸⁸ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 12. Kveldulf remarks that “this king will not bring [his] family much good fortune” if he does not act “friendly. Thorolf seems oblivious to his father's reservations and is eager to receive the king's generosity.

⁸⁹ Graeber, David. "Value as the Importance of Actions." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, 49-90. New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001: 59.

change. This transition is in theory not inherently a negative thing; however, someone (either those behind the oral tradition or the narrator) perceived it as such and portrayed their bias through the framing of Harald as an anti-social antagonist. Perhaps this bias entered the story because of the real King Harald's actions, or because the narrator disapproved of Iceland's colonization by the Norwegian crown. Either way, the role of king becomes associated with the anti-social in a clear anti-monarchical sentiment.

King Harald's actions place Egil's ancestors in a state of uncertainty regarding their land and their place in this new social structure. Thorolf thinks that the family's success in this new world will require a connection to the new social center. He enters the king's service on his father's behalf, becoming one of "his men."⁹⁰ The king accepts him and facilitates a voluntary land transfer from Bard, a distant kinsman of Thorolf, to Thorolf himself:

Then the king made Thorolf a landowner and granted him all the revenues that Bard had previously held, and the right to collect tribute from the Lapps on the same terms. He gave Thorolf a fine, fully rigged longship and sent him on his journey as well equipped as he could be.⁹¹

King Harald's generosity seems to live up to Thorolf's expectations. Gifts of a ship and land from the king signify the status and provide the means necessary to collect tribute for the king. In return for his loyalty, Thorolf has moved up the social ladder with these gifts; he can procure tribute, control revenues and manage land. However, Thorolf has not done anything yet to earn these gifts, so why has the king bestowed them upon him?

King Harald may have given these gifts as an avenue for creating debt. Generosity in gift-giving was first discussed by Mauss in his exploration into the obligation to give, to receive

⁹⁰ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 13.

⁹¹ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 18.

and to reciprocate. Mauss noted that among many groups, including the Maori of Polynesia, gifts held a force which imbued each gift with honor and prestige; if a gift was not given, accepted and reciprocated, one or both parties faced the threat of losing their social authority.⁹² Sahlins built on Mauss's idea by arguing that generosity in an initial gift acts as "a starting mechanism of leadership because it creates followership."⁹³ In other words, leaders may give a generous gift to create an "economic imbalance," to tie the receiver in debt and in an obligation to reciprocate. This debt ties the receiver to the giver, creating an imbalance bond between leader and follower.⁹⁴

These theories concerning exchange and leadership work to explain this scene. King Harald offers Thorolf land and a ship, which Thorolf accepts out of social obligation. These gifts tie Thorolf to the king because of his obligation to reciprocate with material items or acts of service equal in value. Greater generosity creates greater debt, so in giving land and a ship, King Harald has clasped Thorolf into a social relationship that will last a while.⁹⁵ King Harald uses these gifts which he gives to Thorolf and his other men as a starting mechanism through which he is able to create loyalties; these loyalties consolidate his leadership and define his role as king. He also is creating a new social class of men who are defined by their debt to the crown.

After getting used to his new position and getting wealthy off the taxes he now collects, Thorolf wastes no time in starting his repayment of King Harald. He "spare[s] no expense" in throwing a feast for 800 men, including the king and his household.⁹⁶ Despite the splendor, King

⁹² Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them" In *The Gift*: 66.

⁹³ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 190.

⁹⁴ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 189.

⁹⁵ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them" In *The Gift*: 66. Things exchanged do not have to be material goods as long as they are deemed equal in value. Acts of service, favors, etc can be exchanged.

⁹⁶ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 21.

Harald seems angry at the display. After three days of feasting, Thorolf gives the king another gift to try and lift his mood:

Offshore lay the dragon-prowed ship that Thorolf had had made, with its awnings up and fully rigged. Thorolf gave the ship to the king, asking him to respect his intention in having so many men at the feast simply as a gesture of honor towards him, not as a challenge. The king took this well and grew friendly ... Many people rightly added words of praise for the splendid feast and noble gift ... and the great strength that [the king] enjoyed in such men. They parted in friendship.⁹⁷

Thorolf gives the king a ship, perhaps echoing the gift of a ship which the king originally made to him. Thorolf commissioned this ship from artisans; therefore, its value may come from the intense and unique labor put into it.⁹⁸ In giving the ship to the king, Thorolf simultaneously reinforces their good relationship and supports King Harald's role as king; in putting wealth back into the king's hands, Thorolf shows he supports the king's power to redistribute. Although Thorolf gives to the king out of fealty, he does so with an air of pacification, as if calming an unruly and temperamental child. This slight at the expense of King Harald shows a glimpse of narrator bias. The narrator, likely familiar with similar exchanges between Icelandic landholders and the Norwegian crown during the Age of the Sturlungs, allows their opinion of the Norwegian crown's power to turn King Harald into a childish and easily-manipulated character. The narrator portrays the protagonist's lineage in Norway as a wise people who pacify their power-hungry king until they can gain true independence in Iceland.

Through the examples presented in "Gifting Gone Right," the reader experiences how characters in the Icelandic sagas use gift exchange to reinforce and redefine their roles within the

⁹⁷ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder: 21.

⁹⁸ Graeber, David. "Value as the Importance of Actions." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 55-56.

kinship unit and the political sphere. We have no way of knowing to what degree the exchange portrayed in the sagas reflects the exchange used between the actual settlers of Iceland. However, we do know that exchanges gone right in these sagas reflect how the later narrators perceived the reinforcement of social relationships in a long-ago Iceland. Studying these exchanges gives us a greater understanding of the minds behind the written stories.

3.2. Gifting Gone Wrong

We've discussed what makes a successful exchange. But what occurs when gift exchange is offered and denied, or goes wrong and is left incomplete? In all three sagas, the narrators often describe incomplete exchanges in detail, walking the reader through why the exchange cannot go through and the consequences of its failure. Incomplete exchange occurs due to many types of complications, such as concerns of reciprocity, generational differences and changed minds. Instances of failed gift-giving are interesting because they show social groupings: what is considered exchangeable vs what is not, who can exchange with who, etc. If successful exchange shows how people reinforce their relationships within the social world, unsuccessful exchange pushes against the boundaries of those relationships to show where they exist. Below, some key examples of failed exchange are discussed in detail.

3.2.1. A Future in Iceland (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*)

In the very beginning of *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, a failed exchange occurs. Like the others, this saga begins with the protagonist's ancestors and follows their settlement of Iceland. Onund Tree-leg, the great-grandfather of the protagonist, arrives in Iceland after leaving Norway to escape King Harald's wrath, the same King Harald who was in conflict with Egil's

ancestors.⁹⁹ The reason King Harald dislikes Onund is because Onund had helped his own kinsmen enact revenge for the king's unlawful seizing of their property in Norway, something which King Harald also does to citizens in *Egil's Saga* as he attempts to carve a place in the social structure for a king.¹⁰⁰ Fleeing Harald's wrath, Onund Tree-leg and his traveling companions sail to Iceland. Upon landing, they encounter Eirik Snare, a wealthy settler who has already "taken" a significant amount of land in the area.¹⁰¹ When they meet, Eirik acts very generously towards Onund:

*When Eirik heard that Onund had arrived, he invited him to accept anything he wanted, but said there was little land left that had not been settled already. ... They went across the fjords and when they reached Ofaera Eirik said, "Look at this place. None of the land here is settled, all the way to Bjorn's settlement. ... I will keep my word and you can have whatever of my land that you like." Onund said he would accept the offer and took the land from Ofaera and the three bays of Byrigsvik, Kolbeinsvik and Kaldbaksvik ...*¹⁰²

By "invit[ing] him to accept" a gift of property, Eirik provides Onund a way to insert himself into the settlement of Iceland. Eirik and Onund do not have any preceding connection that implores them to exchange gifts, so why would Eirik give such a valuable gift away to a virtual stranger? Eirik's giving and Onund's acceptance of his gift may have been socially prompted. Mauss, as noted before, theorized that parties, socially connected or not, often endure the social obligation to give, to receive and to reciprocate.¹⁰³ He notes that "to refuse to give ...

⁹⁹ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 34.

¹⁰⁰ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 11.

¹⁰¹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 15. ; While Eirik, one of the first settlers, could simply take Icelandic land, others were not so lucky. Thorbjorn Sur, the protagonist's father in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, arrives later and must purchase land ("Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 504.)

¹⁰² "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 15-16.

¹⁰³ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 73.

to refuse to take, is equivalent to declaring war; it is to refuse alliance and communication.”¹⁰⁴

Eirik’s generosity, which seems to reflect good character, may in fact be the result of the settlers’ growing realization that they could not afford social tension on the small island they now share.

Or, Eirik and Onund may have respectively given and received this gift to proactively create a beneficial relationship. Sahlins argued that “people who owe each other nothing yet presume to gain from each other something” may form trade-friendship by establishing exchange rates over time through frequent gift-giving and copious generosity. This cycle of generous gifting creates a cycle of debt linking the two parties together socially.¹⁰⁵ Mauss defined trade between parties not socially connected as simply an obligation in order to maintain social peace; Sahlins frames trade between strangers as less of an obligation and more of an act from which both parties gain. From Sahlins’ perspective, Eirik and Onund don’t just exchange to avoid social disunity; they exchange to begin a socially-advantageous relationship, the support from which will benefit them both in starting their lives in a new land.

Onund Tree-leg accepts Eirik’s gift. With his newly-acquired land, Onund Tree-leg provides for his family, from which the saga’s protagonist, Grettir, will emerge. According to both Mauss and Sahlins, Onund must reciprocate by giving Eirik a gift valued as much if not more than the land he has received. However, Onund is never recorded to give anything to Eirik, yet he certainly has the resources to do so; the saga notes that he “made a farmstead in Kaldbak and kept a large household.”¹⁰⁶ The men do not pass their shared goodwill onto their descendents. The gifted land causes issues between their respective children: Flosi, the son of Eirik Snare, and Thorgrim Grey-head, the son of Onund Tree-leg and grandfather to the saga’s

¹⁰⁴ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 74.

¹⁰⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "Exchange Value and the Diplomacy of Primitive Trade." In *Stone Age Economics*: 281-82.

¹⁰⁶ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 16.

protagonist. Despite Flosi's disapproval, Thorgrim, his brothers, and all their associated family continue to live on the land which Eirik originally provided. According to the saga:

*No quarrels occurred while the older men lived, but after Eirik died Flosi claimed that the people from Kaldbak had no legal right to the lands that Eirik had given to Onund. A serious dispute developed among them, but Thorgrim and his brothers remained there as before. The local people could not hold games together after that.*¹⁰⁷

In arguing against the legality of Eirik's gift, Flosi claims his father's verbal agreement has no weight. Recall how Eirik told Onund: "I will keep my word and you can have whatever of my land that you like."¹⁰⁸ Eirik and Onund considered this statement to be a verbal agreement of exchange, one that was legally binding; after all, they were among the first settlers, so who could challenge their authority to divide up land? Flosi, however, considers a verbal agreement to be insufficient evidence of gifting and ownership, showing a change in gifting procedure between the two generations. This shift marks the beginnings of legal development unique to Iceland.

Later, the two families clash again over the rights to a whale's carcass which has washed up on the beach. While arguing over the rights to it, "Flosi asked [Thorgrim] to prove that Eirik had specifically granted Onund Tree-leg the right to everything that drifted ashore there, otherwise he would defend it by force."¹⁰⁹ However, while Eirik was alive "no agreement was made about harvesting the beach, because so much drifted in that everyone could take what he wanted."¹¹⁰ Flosi, having grown up in an increasingly-privatized Iceland, assumes that the beach must be owned as the land is owned. Flosi is cast as the antagonist because his desire for proof of

¹⁰⁷ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder: 18.

¹⁰⁸ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder: 16.

¹⁰⁹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder: 20.

¹¹⁰ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder: 16.

ownership, both concerning the land and the wildlife, comes from a selfish place and disrupts social unity. However, while his desperation to hoard resources is inherently anti-social, his outlook makes sense; he comes from a generation who watched the limited land surrounding them disappear and turn into a purchasable good.¹¹¹ Because Flosi and Thorgrim hold differing ideas of land ownership (Thorgrim in line with the older settler ideas of sharing land as opposed to Flosi's focus on ownership), the two are unable to reconcile their perspectives concerning the whale carcass or the gifted land.

However, if Thorgrim and Flosi are of the same Icelandic generation, why does Thorgrim operate under the antiquated system of collective, given land and Flosi under the growing trend of privatization? They may differ simply because they grew up during this transition and have different opinions on what system of spatial division should be in place. Another option is that their characters may have fallen into the trap of narrator bias. Thorgrim is like Thorolf from *Egil's Saga* (see "Dealings with King Harald") in that he is an ancestor of the main Icelandic protagonist and is following an antiquated framework during a period of social change. Just like Thorolf and King Harald, Flosi and Thorgrim serve as representatives of the old and the new; but while Thorolf acknowledges and embraces change, Thorgrim does not. The narrator's portrayal of Thorolf and Thorgrim as honorable men trying to adjust to unfair change shows the narrator's bias towards an idealized, long-gone Scandinavia.

After tensions rise over the whale carcass dispute, a fight ensues and Flosi kills Thorfinn, a brother of Thorgrim. The matter is taken to the Althing:¹¹²

¹¹¹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 504.

¹¹² See "Medieval Norway and Iceland" for context about the Althing.

*Flosi was outlawed along with many others who had been with him. ... Thorgrim and his brother were unable to prove that they had paid for the lands and drift rights which Flosi had laid claim to. ... [The Lawspeaker] said that in a legal sense some payment appeared to have been made, although not the full price ... After this they were reconciled.*¹¹³

The Lawspeaker's ruling dismisses the legality of the verbal agreement between Eirik and Onund. While for the settler generation a verbal agreement and an exchange were enough to validate ownership, these methods no longer meet the current population's desire for evidence. When the Lawspeaker references "payment" not being given for the land, he does not mean a payment of currency. To show that the land given by Eirik had not been paid for in full, he discusses a preceding case in which land was given in exchange for a cloak.¹¹⁴

Land, according to both theorists and the Lawspeaker is an exchangeable good, but only if it is reciprocated. For how essential land is to starting a life in Iceland, one cloak seems a rather insufficient gift to provide in exchange. Because gifts are given and reciprocated to create lasting social relationships, perhaps the cloak was not meant to sufficiently handle the debt the land created; instead, the act of reciprocation with the cloak was sufficient to create a relationship and consider the land given. In failing to offer at least something in reciprocity for the land, the Lawspeaker considers the exchange between Onund and Eirik incomplete and Onund's rights to the land null. The Lawspeaker gives ownership of the land to Eirik's inheritors (not including Flosi, as his outlawry earned through his underhanded fighting and sabotage denied him inheritance within the social sphere).

¹¹³ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 21.

¹¹⁴ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder: 22.

This case of an unreciprocated gift sets a legal precedent for the rest of the saga: unlike the rules of the settlers, gift exchange involving certain resources now must be provable and at least partly reciprocated. It marks a shift in Icelandic social tradition and shows the development of rules regarding reciprocity unique to the population (at least, unique from the settlers' home country, Norway). Although the Lawspeaker settled the case, the gift from Eirik to Onund remains unreciprocated; with the original exchangers deceased, Onund's burden to reciprocate lingers, descending upon his living successors.¹¹⁵ Perhaps this inherited social wrong affects Grettir, the saga's namesake and direct descendant of Onund. Outlawed twice and cursed to isolation on the fringes of the Icelandic social world, Grettir certainly atones for Onund's mistake.

3.2.2. Blood and Earth (*Gisli Sursson's Saga*)

In the beginning of *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, two unfulfilled exchanges occur which, just like the unfulfilled gift of land in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, spark a series of social consequences for the protagonist. I theorize that the two unfulfilled exchanges in *Gisli Sursson's Saga* are linked in a domino effect; the failure of one to be completed causes the failure of the other. The first unfulfilled exchange involves the protagonist's uncle, conveniently also named Gisli. The family is residing in Norway when Gisli the former's brother, Ari, is killed by a berserker. Gisli the former borrows a sword named Grasida from his sister-in-law's slave; he does so because "whoever fights with it is assured victory."¹¹⁶ Gisli wins the battle against the berserker with Grasida's help, and he reacts badly when the slave asks for the sword back:

Kol [the slave] demanded that his sword be returned. Gisli, unwilling to part with it, offered him money instead. Kol wanted nothing but the sword, but it was not returned.

¹¹⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 49.

¹¹⁶ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 500.

*Greatly displeased by this, the slave attacked Gisli ... in response, Gisli dealt Kol such a blow to the head with Grasida that the blade broke as it smashed through his skull. Thus both men met their death.*¹¹⁷

Gisli tries offering Kol money for the sword; however, since Kol “len[t]” Gisli the sword, as opposed to gifting it, nothing could be accepted in its place. This passage shows that within this gift economy, something which is lent is beyond the realm of value and of exchange; a lent item can be assigned value, but that value serves no purpose when it is not playing a role in exchange. Although Gisli dying might seem a fitting consequence for his social offense, Kol also dies without being given back his sword. The loan remains active and the only material item which could resolve it, Grasida, is no longer able to be returned.

Because the sword cannot be returned and Gisli the former cannot be punished, the consequences for this social injustice must become the problem of another family member; as Sahlins notes, mutuality of being among kin allows for the “sins of the father [to] descend on sons, daughters, and other kinsmen, who then must suffer the consequences.”¹¹⁸ Gisli the former is not recorded to have had children and his siblings do not play large roles in the story, so the obligation to handle his social wrongdoing had to pass to another descendant. Of Gisli the former’s siblings, Thorbjorn Sur is the only one with mentioned children, the third of which being the protagonist Gisli. Although he is not the oldest son, Gisli inherits his uncle’s name; it makes sense that he would inherit his uncle’s social bill as well.

In the time between the two instances of unfulfilled exchange, Gisli, the protagonist, is born and raised in Norway. His family moves to Iceland and several marriages occur, including his own to a woman named Aud. The second instance of attempted exchange occurs in Iceland

¹¹⁷ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 501.

¹¹⁸ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 49.

and involves the protagonist Gisli and three of his relatives: his brother Thorkel, their brother-in-law Thorgrim (married to their sister, Thordis), and Gisli's brother-in-law Vestein (the brother of Gisli's wife, Aud). The four men travel to the Spring Assembly, one of thirteen local assemblies held annually across Iceland.¹¹⁹ At the assembly, a man named Gest predicts that the four men will "no longer see eye to eye" within three years.¹²⁰ Gisli grows concerned with Gest's statement and says:

*"I am sure this report is correct, but let us make certain that his prediction does not come true. ... We four will make our bond of friendship even stronger than before by pledging our sworn brotherhood."*¹²¹

Gisli using the phrase "sworn brotherhood" to describe the bond they will create is significant. If we interpret brotherhood in a more figurative sense, the word simply implies equal relationships between all its members, which would create a significant change from the four men's varying relationships to one another. "Brotherhood" is mentioned by Sahlins as a common type of kinship which is created postnatally; he theorizes that a "common substance" shared in ritual or in everyday life can be used to create kinship bonds like brotherhood in certain cultures.¹²² To create their brotherhood, the four men share the substances of blood and earth in a ritual. They create the ritual space by cutting three sides of a strip of turf and propping it up from the ground with a spear. The four men go into the space:

Then they drew blood and let it drip down on to the soil beneath the turf strip and stirred it together - the soil and the blood. Then they all fell to their knees and swore an oath that

¹¹⁹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 756.

¹²⁰ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 506.

¹²¹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 506.

¹²² Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 9 and 28.

*each would avenge the other as if they were brothers, and they called on all the gods as their witness.*¹²³

This ritual of brotherhood simultaneously facilitates and symbolizes the men's transition from individuals to a brotherhood. According to Victor Turner, rituals are made of three stages: the separation, a symbolic gesture which separates an individual from a recognized state; a liminal stage where an individual is part of no state; and an aggregation, where a ritualized action marks the individual as having entered a new state.¹²⁴ The mixing of the earth and their blood separates the men from their state of unequal relations, and they will remain stateless until the ritual ends, attaching them to the state of uniform brotherhood.

The mixing of the blood and earth is the symbolic action which marks the men's separation from their unbalanced kinships. These materials were not chosen at random. The spilling and mixing of their blood actively creates their kinship and shows how each man's individual loyalties and obligations to parts of the larger family washes away, mixing the men themselves into a larger "conjoined existence."¹²⁵ The blood's mixture with the earth ties the success of their created kinship to the earth of Iceland. The earth is a common substance with which to create kinship; anthropologists have observed many groups who define kinship by sharing geographical space and consuming food produced from shared land.¹²⁶ The use of Iceland's earth in this kinship ritual recognizes the earth as holding a similar kin-creating power; in using it, the men release their ideas of land privatization and commit to kinship's mutuality of being. However, before they are able to complete the ritual, something goes wrong:

¹²³ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 506.

¹²⁴ Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage." In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, 93-111. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973: 94.

¹²⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 44.

¹²⁶ Sahlins, Marshall "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 6 ; Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf." *Cultural Anthropology*: 439.

*But as they all clasped hands, Thorgrim said, "I will have enough trouble to deal with if I so bind myself to Thorkel and Gisli, my brothers-in-law, but I bear no obligation to Vestein" - and he quickly withdrew his hand.*¹²⁷

Thorgrim refuses to complete the ritual because he does not want to take on the interdependence and responsibilities associated with mutuality of being. He is unable and unwilling to create a closer relationship with the other three men because he is holding onto the "genealogically reckoned distance" which separates him and Vestein into separate groups; because he refuses to offer to Vestein the duties expected of kin, he cannot become kin with him.¹²⁸ By refusing to give and to make kin, Thorgrim acts in an anti-social manner which Mauss would label as "equivalent to declaring war."¹²⁹ Thorgrim's refusal to create kin for the greater good creates his role as antagonist; because of him, the brotherhood between the men is not formed.

Because of Thorgrim's anti-social actions, the brotherhood ritual is interrupted while the men exist stateless in the liminal space. As Turner notes, the liminal space in the middle of a ritual is the place where literal and metaphorical monsters can be created. Anything which reminds people of the "factors of their culture" can be a monster; in defying or combining recognized and separate states, a monster serves to remind individuals of their definitions of state.¹³⁰ Thorgrim becomes a monster due to his actions; he exists in a space between his refusal to create kin with Vestein and begrudging willingness to create kin with Gisli and Thorkel. He simultaneously acts to create brotherhood yet retains the mindset of unequal relations; he

¹²⁷ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 507.

¹²⁸ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 53.

¹²⁹ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 74.

¹³⁰ Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage." In *The Forest of Symbols*: 105. Turner uses the example of McCulloch's man-animal to explain this idea. The man-animal makes those who see it aware of the different states of man and animal; those who see it instantly recognize the monster as something stateless, something still inside liminal space and therefore something not recognized by society.

becomes a monster, a ritual usperer, and thus his later anti-social actions, including the murder of Vestein, do not come as a surprise.¹³¹

Gisli observes Thorgrim's anti-social behavior and also withdraws his hand:

*"Then the others may do the same," said Gisli, and he withdrew his hand, too. "I will not burden myself with ties to a man who refuses to bind himself to Vestein, my brother-in-law."*¹³²

Gisli's comment shows that Thorgrim leaving broke the whole ritual. Although Thorgrim has removed himself from the ritual, his blood is still mixed with the earth, impossible to separate from the symbolic action which separated them from their states. Since Thorgrim refuses to aggregate into the new state of brotherhood, the other three men cannot use the symbolic action tied with his blood to join the new state of brotherhood. Thus, the ritual must remain incomplete. The ritual is thus dissolved and the men enter back into their original states of unequal relations; they have not entered their sworn brotherhood. The scene ends:

*They were all deeply affected by this. Then Gisli said to Thorkel, his brother, "This is what I thought would happen. What has taken place here will come to nothing. I suspect fate will take its course now."*¹³³

Gisli acknowledges that they have not completed the ritual and therefore have not created the intended brotherhood. The men did all they could socially to prevent the possibility of infighting to no avail. Readers know that the future will bring nothing but tragedy to the four men, as a cycle of vengeance begins soon after with the murder of Vestein. The question

¹³¹ Although the saga's narrator technically leaves the murder of Vestein unsolved, Thorgrim brags about his murder. Some scholars, including myself, believe Thorgrim's boasting is an admission of guilt. ("Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 496 and 519.)

¹³² "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 507.

¹³³ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 507.

remains: would this ritual have been unsuccessful and would the family's story have been one of tragedy if Gisli the former hadn't left his social obligation unfulfilled?

The story of Gisli the former is explained in great detail at the beginning of the saga, yet the narrator does not tie it to the main plot. One could argue that perhaps the story of Gisli and Kol's clash was included simply due to requirements of the *Íslendinga sögur* (family sagas) genre. However, instead of preserving information concerning Gisli the former's land and title and other relevant information to a family lineage, oral tradition and the narrator only spoke of Gisli the former's mishap with Kol; this exclusion of family information in favor of a short lesson can be seen as an intentional choice. Through Gisli the former's mistake, the protagonist's family is burdened with atonement. The saga would not have reason to name Gisli, an upstanding man with no quarrels, as its protagonist if he didn't inherit problems. The reason this ritual occurred and the reason it was unsuccessful ties back to Gest's prediction: that Gisli's family is fated to ruin, a ruin they may not deserve but one they inherited nonetheless.

3.2.3. Tapestries and Their Consequences (*Gisli Sursson's Saga*)

This section builds off the plot from "Blood and Earth" as we continue to analyze the downfall of Gisli Sursson's kin. For understanding the passages discussed in this section, it is essential to know that since the failed ritual, Gisli and his brother Thorkel have parted ways, dividing up their once shared property. Thorkel explains to his brother that Gisli seems to independently run their joint farm and thus Thorkel feels he cannot be successful.¹³⁴ Thorkel grows closer to Thorgrim after he gains independence. This forming relationship between Thorkel and Thorgrim makes Gisli nervous for Vestein, who has been away from Iceland. After all, Thorgrim made it clear during the failed ritual that he harbors no desire to make kin with

¹³⁴ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 511.

Vestein, and Thorkel has reason to hate him too: recently, he learned that his wife, Asgerd, once held feelings for Vestein. After observing Thorkel and Thorgrim's newfound relationship, Gisli notes to his wife, Aud, that he "would gladly pay a great deal for [Vestein] to not come [back to Iceland]," instilling in the reader a somber dread for what's to come.¹³⁵

Vestein then returns to Iceland. He reaches Thorgrim and Thorkel's farm but is warned away by Geirmund, a youth taken by Thorkel in the property split.¹³⁶ Gisli hears that Vestein has returned and sends two men to fetch Vestein and bring him to the safety of Gisli's farm; it's a good thing that he did so, because Thorgrim sends a spy soon after to scout out Vestein's whereabouts.¹³⁷ In gratitude for the shelter, Vestein offers fine gifts to his sister Aud, his brother-in-law Gisli:

*"[Vestein] took out a tapestry sixty ells long and a head-dress made from a piece of cloth some twenty ells long with three gold strands woven along its length, and three finger bowls worked with gold. He brought these out as gifts for his sister, for Gisli and for his sworn brother, Thorkel – should he want to accept them."*¹³⁸

Although the ritual was disrupted, Vestein still refers to Thorkel as his "sworn brother," implying that he considers their relationship to be strong and reinforced through generalized reciprocity.¹³⁹ Because he refers to Thorkel in this manner and provides him with gifts, Vestein is either unaware of Thorkel's developing closeness with Thorgrim (after all, he has been away from Iceland for a while), or he does not let this development, which does not bode well for himself, cloud his treatment of and loyalty to his kin. In offering Thorkel these gifts, Vestein

¹³⁵ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 512.

¹³⁶ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 514. Geirmund is noted to be a child and "a dependent." The saga is unclear if this means he is related to Thorkel and Gisli's family (p. 511).

¹³⁷ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 514.

¹³⁸ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 515.

¹³⁹ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 175.

initiates a further blending of their “persons and things” with the aim of deepening their sense of kinship and brotherhood.¹⁴⁰ The value of these gifts, indicated by the noted length and size of each item (measured in ells) and the material makeup (gold), serves to emphasize how much Vestein values his kinship with Thorkel and Gisli; Vestein gives generously with the intent of creating debt, the vehicle for maintaining a social relationship.¹⁴¹ At the same time, his act of giving reproduces the social relation, their kinship.¹⁴²

After inspecting the gifts from Vestein, Gisli and Thorkel must decide if they accept the offer. Thorkel turns down the gifts and encourages Gisli to take them:

Gisli showed him the gifts and asked his brother to choose what he wanted. Thorkel answered, ‘It would be better if you took them all. I don’t want to accept these gifts – I cannot see how they will be repaid.’ And he was determined not to accept them. Gisli went home and felt that everything was pointed in one direction.”¹⁴³

Thorkel’s reasoning for turning down Vestein’s gifts is the stipulation of repayment, as he comments “I cannot see how [Vestein’s gifts] will be repaid.” With this statement, Thorkel shows a dissonance with Vestein in their perspectives of their relationship. Thorkel sees Vestein’s gift as something which must be repaid in full, and he would rather turn down a way of renewing their relationship than be unable to repay Vestein and therefore lose his social authority.¹⁴⁴ In seeing the debt as something to be repaid within a time frame, Thorkel reveals that he views the exchange as one between strangers or enemies, as one only expects exact repayment from those

¹⁴⁰ Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*: 87.

¹⁴¹ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 189.

¹⁴² Graeber, David. "Value as the Importance of Actions." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 59.

¹⁴³ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 515.

¹⁴⁴ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 66.

one cannot trust.¹⁴⁵ In worrying about repaying Vestein's gift, Thorkel reveals that he views his relationship with Vestein, his own brother-in-law, as distant and impersonal. In saying he would rather turn down Vestein's gifts than be tied to him in debt, Thorkel acts in an anti-social manner towards Vestein, revealing his growing alliance with Thorgrim and foreshadowing his involvement in the murder of Vestein.¹⁴⁶ In refusing to take and to give, Thorkel, in the words of Mauss, acts in a way similar to "declaring war."¹⁴⁷

This passage reveals to the reader that oral tradition and/or the narrator considered items like the ones Vestein offers, large and made of gold, to have a high value. Some theorists like Marx would argue the items' value comes from the labor put into their creation; others like Graeber think that value comes from all actions which surround an item (labor, acquisition, use, etc).¹⁴⁸ Here, we see an item's value measured by an unseen yet established rate of exchange. When two items are exchanged over time between groups, their values become fixed by a rate of exchange; the item itself does not hold inherent value, but it gains value through its exchange.¹⁴⁹ When judging Vestein's gift, Thorkel gauges its value based on unknown past exchange and deems it high.

Despite the high value of the gifts and therefore the large debt accumulated by accepting them, Gisli accepts Vestein's gifts; unlike Thorkel, Gisli embraces the debt and the obligation to reciprocate to Vestein in due time, which will foster a deeper sense of "fellowship," as Sahlins

¹⁴⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 176.

¹⁴⁶ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 516-17. Thorkel's intense inquisition into Aud's wellbeing after the death of Vestein is seen by some scholars as guilt for Vestein's death, enough to tie Thorkel to the murder.

¹⁴⁷ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 74.

¹⁴⁸ Graeber, David. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 55, 70, 105.

¹⁴⁹ Sahlins, Marshall. "Exchange Value and the Diplomacy of Primitive Trade." In *Stone Age Economics*: 261.

describes it, between them.¹⁵⁰ Combined with the dissolution of his and Thorkel's farm (a loss of mutuality of being from which the two will never recover), Gisli grows closer with Vestein and farther from his own brother. This shift in relationships provides a clear example of how socially-constructed relationships can create stronger and more impactful bonds than those designated by birth.¹⁵¹ As Gisli notes in the passage above, this distance from Thorkel "point[s] in one direction," towards the family's dissolution.¹⁵²

Gisli's prediction proves to be true. A few days later, Gisli finds Vestein dead in his home. Upon seeing the body, Gisli removes the murder weapon, a spear from Vestein's chest; the narrator notes that "at that time, whoever drew a weapon from a death wound was obliged to take revenge."¹⁵³ Gisli hides the spear in his home so that no one knows he is the one who must avenge Vestein; I theorize he does so because he suspects Thorgrim and Thorkel to be the culprits and he does not want them to grow wary of him while he pieces together a plan. At Vestein's funeral, Thorkel and Thorgrim interact with Gisli in ways which some scholars believe implicates them in the crime.¹⁵⁴ Gisli does not act on his suspicions until Thorgrim and Thorkel decide to throw a feast together to celebrate the Winter Nights. Thorgrim tries to convince Thorkel to send a man to ask for the tapestries from Gisli:

Thorgrim said to Thorkel, " ... It seems to me there's quite a difference between owning [the tapestries] and never having them at all. I wish you'd have them sent for." Thorkel

¹⁵⁰ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 58. ; Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*: 108.

¹⁵¹ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 3.

¹⁵² "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 515.

¹⁵³ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 515-16.

¹⁵⁴ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 516-17. Thorgrim brags at the site of Vestein's grave, and Thorkel acts overly concerned for Aud's wellbeing after the death of her brother.

answered, "A wise man does all things in moderation. I will not have them sent for."

"Then I will do it," said Thorgrim.¹⁵⁵

In this passage, Thorgrim implies the tapestries have significant value, not just due to their exchange rate as Thorkel believes but from a social use as well. Thorgrim's comment here implies that even temporary ownership would provide prestige. These tapestries have the ability to reflect their own prestige onto their owner; much like Grettir's sword, they gain value through accumulated past actions of labor and acquisition, and Thorgrim wishes for their value to be reflected upon himself in the public setting of the feast.¹⁵⁶ However, Thorgrim's desire to own the tapestries is anti-social; the point of giving and receiving should be the creation of social relationships, with the exchanged items acting as the conduit through which "lives are blended together."¹⁵⁷ In desiring to own without desiring to connect with others, Thorgrim further defines himself as an antagonist.

Unlike Thorgrim, Thorkel does not wish to have the tapestries sent for. With his proverb, Thorkel ties owning the tapestries with rashness and selfishness. He may be calling Thorgrim's focus on the ownership of the tapestries (as opposed to the fostering of social relationships which the exchange of them encourages) unwise and anti-social. Or, Thorkel could be warning against engaging unnecessarily with Gisli, as their murder of Vestein has already drawn enough attention to themselves; large, shimmering tapestries would not aid them in laying low. Thorkel eventually agrees to ask Gisli for his tapestries and sends the youth Geirmund in his stead, the same

¹⁵⁵ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 519.

¹⁵⁶ Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*: 87. ; Mauss 87 ; Graeber, David. "Action and Reflection, or Notes toward a Theory of Wealth and Power." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 105.

¹⁵⁷ Mauss, Marcel. "The Extent of This System: Liberality, Honor, Money." In *The Gift*: 87 and 104.

Geirmund who warned Vestein away from Thorgrim's home when he first returned to Iceland.¹⁵⁸

Upon hearing Thorkel's request via Geirmund, Gisli confers with his wife, Aud:

"Do you want to lend the tapestries, Aud," asked Gisli. [Says Aud,] "You know that I would have neither this nor any other good befall them, nor indeed anything that would add to their honour. ..." *"Was this my brother Thorkel's wish?" asked Gisli. [Says Geirmund,] "He approved my coming for them."* *"That is reason enough," said Gisli.*¹⁵⁹

Gisli agrees to lend the tapestries to Thorkel because of his kinship bond with his brother; just the mention of Thorkel's name "is reason enough" for him to give without question. This statement from Gisli reveals the narrator's perception of medieval Icelandic brotherly kinship: that even if generalized reciprocity and/or mutuality of being is not maintained over time, a brother should still strive to help his brother if the need arises. Because Gisli offers the tapestries to Thorkel regardless of their declining relationship, his role as a brother is reinforced.¹⁶⁰ The unrestrained giving into brotherly bond differs from the kinship bond between father and son as described in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* (and as discussed in my section "The Gift of a Sword"), into which a son must provide consistent generalized reciprocity before he can expect his father to reciprocate.

Thorgrim likely had Thorkel send for the tapestries instead of doing so himself because he recognized Gisli would give to Thorkel due to their brotherly kinship. Thorgrim, on the other

¹⁵⁸ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 514.

¹⁵⁹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 520.

¹⁶⁰ Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*: 169-177. ; Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf.": 438. Thorkel, through his actions later in the saga, does not succeed in reinforcing his role as brother; much later in the story, after Gisli has been made an outlaw, Thorkel provides some material gifts to him but refuses unlimited aid, even though Gisli has previously provided for him and has "long refrained from asking [for his] assistance" (p. 533).

hand, may not have been met with the same success; he is a brother-in-law to Gisli and Thorkel, not a brother, and his increased social distance and his dissolution of the brotherhood ritual do not put him in the best position to ask for a gift from Gisli.

Gisli hands the tapestries over to the youth Geirmund with one stipulation:

“A gift always looks to be repaid. I want you to unbolt three of the doors [of Thorgrim’s home] tonight. Remember how you came to be sent on this errand.” Geirmund answered, “Will your brother Thorkel be in any danger?” “None at all,” said Gisli. “Then it will be done.”¹⁶¹

Gisli framing the exchange as one with Geirmund while knowing the request came from Thorkel works with Mauss’s idea that an individual never represents themselves in an exchange but rather represents a collective.¹⁶² By explicitly exchanging with Geirmund, Gisli reinforces Geirmund’s role as part of Thorkel’s household and Geirmund’s loyalty to Thorkel. Gisli’s request for immediate repayment from Geirmund is not unexpected. Immediate reciprocity, according to Sahlins, signifies the two parties are socially distant; by placing a time frame on reciprocity, the parties show their lack of trust for one another.¹⁶³ By asking for immediate reciprocity from Geirmund, Gisli acknowledges the growing social distance between himself and Thorkel; they are still kin and Gisli still will provide for Thorkel, but they no longer share the comfortable generalized reciprocity they once did.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 520.

¹⁶² Mauss, Marcel. "Introduction" In *The Gift*: 58-59.

¹⁶³ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 176.

¹⁶⁴ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange": 175. Gisli and Thorkel once shared a farm; living together entails the sharing of kinship substances such as food and generalized reciprocity, both of which reinforce a close social relationship.

With this exchange, Gisli sets the precedent in this saga for a material item exchanged for a service.¹⁶⁵ Gisli has evaluated the tapestries and considers them equal in value to a favor which will ultimately cost Thorgrim his life: Gisli uses the open doors to sneak in that night and kill Thorgrim, thus avenging Vestein.¹⁶⁶ Geirmund does not agree to Gisli's request for reciprocity until he ensures the action will not compromise Thorkel's safety. Although he and Gisli do not explicitly establish that the favor will put Thorgrim's life at stake, it is understood; Geirmund would not consider the exchange of the tapestries for an action balanced unless a larger consequence would result. Geirmund is caught between maintaining his loyalty to Thorkel and providing reciprocity for Gisli. By asking if Thorkel would be in danger, Geirmund ensures that his duty to reciprocity wouldn't conflict with his other duty, his loyalty to his household. Note that Geirmund is concerned for only Thorkel's safety and not the safety of Thorgrim. Living in the same household as the two men, Geirmund likely suspects the main culprit of Vestein's murder is Thorgrim.¹⁶⁷ Geirmund is willing to aid in the resolution of Vestein's murder as long as his loyalty to Thorkel isn't affected. In this case, Gisli and Geirmund aren't just negotiating the value of a man's life; they are negotiating a resolution of justice.

Geirmund upholds his end of the exchange and leaves the doors of Thorgrim's home open. That night, Gisli enters through the unbolted doors, kills Thorgrim, and leaves undetected. Thus, he achieves vengeance for the murder of Vestein, but in doing so he continues the cycle of in-group violence. This series of scenes, beginning with Vestein's offer to Thorkel and ending with Gisli and Geirmund's negotiation, reveals much about how male characters define and

¹⁶⁵ Sahlins notes several examples of value established between goods and services (Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 188 and 209).

¹⁶⁶ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 521.

¹⁶⁷ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 526. A member of Gisli's household tells Thorgrim and Thorkel the news of Vestein's murder. When she reaches their household, she notices both men "had arisen and sat fully armed" as having just committed the crime. As a trusted member in this household, Geirmund must have been clued into the two men's involvement in the murder.

reinforce their relationships via reciprocity. Without this ethnographic reading of the text, the reader can still understand the trials of Gisli and his kin; however, the reader who adopts this approach to reading the texts obtains a richer understanding of the characters and of the way later narrators perceived past Icelandic social organization. The section “Gifting Gone Wrong” as a whole also provides the reader an insight into how the narrators imagined their ancestors’ social world; the changing rules of land ownership show the development of Icelandic society separate from its Norwegian origins, and Gisli’s kin gathering at legal and social events shows Iceland’s success at self-governance. Although failed exchange bodes badly for the characters, the contexts in which it occurs reveals a narrative of a transforming Iceland.

3.3. Compensation and Purchase

Although the narrators portray medieval Iceland as operating under a gift-giving system, the sagas show that purchase was also part of daily life. Characters utilize purchasing power in all three sagas. In *Gisli Sursson’s Saga*, for example, instances like these occur:

*Thorgrim rode out to the ship and bought four hundreds of timber, paying part of the sum immediately and leaving the balance until later.*¹⁶⁸

*Gisli had sold his land to Thorkel Eiriksson and received payment in cash, which was especially convenient for him.*¹⁶⁹

In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, sales are similarly mentioned:

¹⁶⁸ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 507.

¹⁶⁹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal: 527.

*Thorir lived at Melar in Hrutafjord at first, but after the killings at Fagrabrekka he sold the land to Thorhall the Vinlander, the son of Gamli ...*¹⁷⁰

And purchase occurs in *Egil's Saga* as well:

*[Thorolf] also took a great quantity of goods to sell, soon arranged a meeting with the Lapps, collected their taxes and traded with them.*¹⁷¹

With purchase and gift exchange used side by side in the sagas, the reader may inquire about the difference between them; after all, doesn't purchase involve the exchange of two things? While both actions involve the act of exchanging, they differ immensely in other ways. In gift-exchange economies, individuals of varying social distance can exchange gifts; while social distance may limit the types of gifts and manner in which they are exchanged, a variety of relationships can still be reinforced via gift exchange.¹⁷² However, purchase is not meant to be used in such a universal way; anthropologists have noted that purchase within gift economies is often limited to interactions between people with large social distances.¹⁷³ When two parties lack an established, strong relationship, they cannot utilize generalized reciprocity and instead must exchange in the moment via purchase or balanced reciprocity.¹⁷⁴

Purchase works similarly to balanced reciprocity in that it signifies a lack of trust in the parties' relationship, but purchase differs from balanced reciprocity in what is exchanged. Unlike balanced reciprocity where goods or services of determined equal value are exchanged (think Gisli and Geirmund exchanging tapestries for an action), purchase relies on a placeholder, where

¹⁷⁰ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 70.

¹⁷¹ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 20.

¹⁷² Graeber, David. "Action and Reflection, or Notes toward a Theory of Wealth and Power." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 175-177.

¹⁷³ Graeber, David. "The Myth of Barter." In *Debt: The First 5000 Years*: 29.

¹⁷⁴ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 176.

a good or service is exchanged for money.¹⁷⁵ Although purchase can start or improve a relationship like balanced reciprocity can, its exchange of money and a gift, instead of two gifts, differentiates it from gift exchange.

The modern reader may associate the money used in purchase with coinage. However, as noted by Graeber, money is a mere “symbol” of value, a way to measure it.¹⁷⁶ Instead of gaining its value from usefulness or labor or significance to a person, money’s value comes from its ability to compare two goods or services with nothing in common, to stand as a placeholder for these moveable goods in exchange, “to keep track of resources and move things back and forth.”¹⁷⁷ In the Middle Ages, all monies were not coinage; in fact, coins fell out of widespread circulation across Europe until later in the period due to increased localization. In these three sagas, silver pieces are commonly referred to as money; however, archaeologists claim the minting of silver coinage was not widespread until King Harald Hardrada of Norway supported it in the 11th century CE.¹⁷⁸ Perhaps the narrators, like the modern reader, associated money with coinage because coins were the only form of money to which they used in their daily lives; if this is the case, the Icelandic settlers’ version of money may be lost to time.

Characters in the sagas and perhaps the narrators’ generation in medieval Iceland used both purchase and gift exchange in their daily lives. But why talk about purchase in an overview of gift exchange? Why dedicate a whole third of the analysis to it? Purchase must be discussed alongside gift exchange because despite being separate systems, the characters utilize them both

¹⁷⁵ Graeber, David. "The Middle Ages (600 AD-1450 AD)" In *Debt: The First 5000 Years*: 281.

¹⁷⁶ Graeber, David. "The Middle Ages (600 AD-1450 AD)." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 288-289.

¹⁷⁷ Graeber, David. "Action and Reflection, or Notes toward a Theory of Wealth and Power." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 39.

¹⁷⁸ Bagge, Sverre. "State Formation, Social Change, and the Division of Power." In *Cross & Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation*: 126.

to create and maintain their social world. Although money is used instead of gifts, the act of giving connects purchase to this theme of the importance of exchange to social relationships. With two examples of silver money being used to pay the value of a life, this section asks the question: how is the value of a man's life measured?

3.3.1. Silver for a Life (*Gisli Sursson's Saga*)

After word gets around that Gisli has murdered Thorgrim in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*, Thorgrim's brother, a man named Bork, offers a man named Eyjolf the Grey "sixty pieces of silver to do all in his power to find [and kill Gisli]." ¹⁷⁹ Gisli has been outlawed for his murder of Thorgrim, but as a full outlaw he can still legally be killed for his crimes. ¹⁸⁰ Bork does not feel Gisli's outlawry was sufficient punishment for his crime and seeks vengeance for his brother's death; after all, kin, according to Sahlin's experience a "conjoined existence," and the harm of one harms the collective. ¹⁸¹ When Eyjolf fails to deliver results, Bork gets impatient:

[Bork] began to put considerable pressure on Eyjolf. He felt that Eyjolf had not done what was expected of him and that he had got less than he expected for his money. ¹⁸²

In this passage, Bork calls the silver pieces which he used in his purchase of an action "money." Because silver has not been noted to be used for anything else, its use as money works; silver has no usefulness or value in any other context (in the sagas), so it is a blank slate which can be used to compare the value of other goods or actions. ¹⁸³ Bork describes the silver as "his money," even though he has already given it to Eyjolf. With this phrase, Bork implies that the money is still his even after its changing of hands. Perhaps he is commenting on the incomplete

¹⁷⁹ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 531.

¹⁸⁰ "Glossary." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 747.

¹⁸¹ Sahlin, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 44.

¹⁸² "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 532.

¹⁸³ Graeber, David. "The Middle Ages (600 AD-1450 AD)." In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 281.

nature of Eyjolf's pursuit. With the silver money, Bork purchased an action from Eyjolf; but since Gisli has not yet been caught, Eyjolf's part of the exchange remains unfulfilled. Eyjolf has not yet provided something of equal value for Bork, and so the exchange remains in progress. If we view exchange as a ritual, the two men currently operate in an extended liminal space; Bork has completed his symbolic act, but the state of their relationship cannot change until Eyjolf does so as well.¹⁸⁴

In using the phrase "his money," Bork shows that the purchaser can be imbued in money just as the giver is in a gift. Exchange creates relationships because "to present something to someone is to present something of oneself"; "even abandoned by the giver," the thing given retains part of the giver's personhood, which compels the receiver to reciprocate and ties the two together socially.¹⁸⁵ Bork's personhood is imbued in the money and because Eyjolf has not yet given in kind, Bork retains the right to continue to pressure Eyjolf for results. Eyjolf certainly feels the pressure of Bork's insistence. He visits Aud, Gisli's wife, to gather more information on his target:

*Eyjolf offered Aud a large sum of money to disclose Gisli's whereabouts. But that was the last thing she wanted to do. Then they [Eyjolf and his men] threatened to hurt her, but that produced no result, and they were forced to return home. The whole expedition was considered humiliating.*¹⁸⁶

It is not clarified what kind of money Eyjolf offers to Aud, whether the offered money is silver like he was given or another material. The absence of its description and the focus on its

¹⁸⁴ Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage." In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*: 94.

¹⁸⁵ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 71-72.

¹⁸⁶ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 533.

“large sum” imply that for the narrator, and perhaps for the first generations of Icelanders, the large value of what is offered to Aud matters more than what she is offered; this focus on the value rather than the material is in line with how anthropologists define money. In using this phrase, the narrator emphasizes that the act asked of Aud, exposing her husband, is worth a large amount, ergo it must cost her a lot socially to do so. Her negative reaction, it “being the last thing she wanted to do,” supports this idea that selling out one’s husband and kin is not an action which reinforces the role of wife.¹⁸⁷

Aud has acted as a good wife throughout the entire saga; she supports Gisli during the ongoing family feud, stays faithful during his exile, and runs the home independently while he is away. Her kinship with Gisli, which grows stronger the longer they share a home, means that her and Gisli’s “being is mutual”; their sense of kinship is strong after being reinforced for so long, and therefore selling him out to a stranger would go against her very social existence as kin and as a wife.¹⁸⁸ Because Aud only exists in the saga as a wife, what would she be without that role?¹⁸⁹ Denying Eyjolf’s money reinforces her role as a good wife and as good kin.

Eyjolf must have known that he was asking of Aud a near-impossible thing. He does not seem surprised by her refusal and moves on to threaten her with bodily harm. He procures no answer; this does not bode well for his need to reciprocate Bork’s money with results. Eyjolf grows desperate and approaches Aud again:

¹⁸⁷ Rubin, Gayle. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, 157-210. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1975: 179-180.

¹⁸⁸ Sahins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 6 and 28.

¹⁸⁹ Aud, like the majority of female characters in these three sagas, does not exist as her own person; she does not act outside what supports the men in her life. Therefore, if she acted against her role as wife and as a source of support for the protagonist, she would be breaking her purpose as a character.

*You tell me where Gisli is and I will give you three hundred pieces of silver, which I have received as the price on his head, and you will not be present when we take his life. In addition, I will arrange a marriage for you that will be superior in every way to this one.*¹⁹⁰

Eyjolf increases the amount of money offered and specifically offers the silver he was given, showing that Eyjolf is more desperate to fulfill his debt to Bork than he is to profit off of Gisli; after all, his social face is at stake.¹⁹¹ Eyjolf does not change his tactic from his last offer, continuing to entice Aud with things she could gain as an individual: money (and with it the ability to exchange) and a better marriage. Eyjolf offers these things which contradict Aud's role as a wife and her mutuality of being with Gisli; because he himself is acting in an anti-social manner, Eyjolf does not stop to think that Aud would value her social roles more than personal gain.

Aud rejects both the silver money and the prospect of marriage, both symbolic of anti-social unfaithfulness to kin. She replies to this proposition in a manner true to her character:

*... she stood up and [with the silver] struck Eyjolf on the nose, and blood spurted all over him. "Take that for your gullibility," she said, "and all the harm that ensues from it. There was never any hope that I would render my husband into your hands, you evil man. Take this now for your cowardice and your shame, and remember, you wretch, for as long as you live, that a woman has struck you."*¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 547.

¹⁹¹ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 66.

¹⁹² "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 548.

Through her speech, Aud reinforces the idea that kin do not act in a way harmful to each other. Aud uses the offered silver to strike Eyjolf, the same silver imbued with Bork's personhood. Regardless of the social justifiability of Bork's hunt for Gisli, from Aud's perspective he poses an anti-social threat to her kin; therefore, the silver with his personhood imbued within it also hosts this negative force.¹⁹³ In refusing the money, Aud therefore refuses to tie herself to the man who poses a threat to her sociability.

After Eyjolf leaves in defeat, Aud pulls aside a man named Harvard who witnessed the scene:

Aud spoke to him: "It would be wrong to hold back the debt that Gisli owes you. Here is a gold ring I want you to have." "But it is not a debt I was looking to recover," said Harvard. "Even so, said Aud, "I want to pay you back." Actually, she gave him the gold ring for his help [in not letting Eyjolf beat her after she refused his offer].¹⁹⁴

The saga does not make clear the context of Gisli's debt to Harvard; perhaps the scene was lost to time. When Aud discusses his repayment for saving her, she disguises it as her resolving this lingering debt on Gisli's behalf. Harvard does not question Aud managing her husband's debt. Aud ties herself to the debt paying Harvard back as if she owes him herself; this action implies that Aud and Gisli's kinship allows her to give (but does not expect her to give) on his behalf, as their mutuality of being allows.¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, only Gisli seems able to enter debt as an individual; Aud has to disguise her debt under her husband's name in order for Harvard to

¹⁹³ Mauss, Marcel. "The Gifts Exchanged and the Obligation to Return Them." In *The Gift*: 71. Mauss notes that the Maori theory of law understands a gift to hold something of its giver within in, which implores the recipient to reciprocate. Reciprocation creates a social bond. In refusing to accept Bork's silver, Aud refuses the essence of him which would require her to reciprocate and be tied to him socially.

¹⁹⁴ "Gisli Sursson's Saga," translated by Martin S. Regal. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 548.

¹⁹⁵ Sahlins, Marshall. "What Kinship Is - Culture." In *What Kinship Is - And Is Not*: 44.

accept it. Aud's disguising of her own debt within her husband's interests indicates that perhaps a wife cannot have debt. Perhaps part of a wife's gendered labor is to make her debt her husband's and to resolve it as his.¹⁹⁶ Unfortunately, the narrator does not leave us with clues as to whether medieval Icelandic people also managed household debt in this manner.

This series of scenes, starting with Bork and Eyjolf's exchange and ending with Aud's debt management, provide insight into the social implications behind the offering and acceptance of money. This section leaves an important question unanswered: how do the characters determine the value of Gisli's life and of the labor associated with ending it? The next section concerning death compensation will provide some answers.

3.3.2. I Killed a Guy¹⁹⁷ (*The Saga of Grettir the Strong*)

The Saga of Grettir the Strong heavily involves the repayment for a lost life, called "death compensation" by the narrator. When someone in the saga is killed, the households meet as soon as possible to resolve the debt which the killer owes to the deceased's family. Death compensation serves as a method of peace-making; through determining the value of and paying for a lost life, the two parties consider the debt fulfilled and can avoid a feud.¹⁹⁸ The practice of death compensation between families seems to have followed settlers from Norway to Iceland.¹⁹⁹ Initially negotiating compensation amongst themselves, the rise of the Icelandic court system turned death compensation cases into a public affair mediated by the law.²⁰⁰ The law established

¹⁹⁶ Wright, Andrea. "Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf." *Cultural Anthropology*: 438.

¹⁹⁷ Watch <https://youtu.be/z5ZIEYlw5M0> for context.

¹⁹⁸ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 203-204.

¹⁹⁹ "Egil's Saga," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 39-40. When Thorolf is killed by King Harald, his brother Skallagrim demands compensation. He has to go to the king directly because the monarchy served as legislative, judicial, and executive branch; no independent courts existed. This occurs in Norway before the family's migration to Iceland.

²⁰⁰ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 248.

fixed penalties of cash or outlawry, but without an executive state, the guilty party could avoid the consequences through brute force.²⁰¹

So why talk about death compensation if it isn't a form of exchange? The narrators and likely the oral tradition behind the sagas place a lot of emphasis on scenes involving death compensation; even the death of minor characters is mentioned to have been resolved in court, as if the narrator could not leave the audience with an unresolved murder. The amount of death compensation in the sagas indicates its importance to people in Iceland at one time. Furthermore, death compensation is a resolvment of a debt which betters social relations, therefore tying it into the ongoing conversation of reinforced socialness.

In Onund Tree-leg's generation (think back to "A Future in Iceland"), two settlements of death compensation show the transfer of the practice from Norway to Iceland. Right before Onund leaves for Norway, he destroys property taken by the infamous King Harald in an act of defiance. The man charged with keeping this property, Ondott Crow, is killed for his negligence by men in king's service. Angered by his father's death, Asgrim, Ondott Crow's son, takes action against a man named Earl Audun who was involved in the death of his father:

*Asgrim ran at the earl and demanded compensation for his father's death, because Audun had plotted with Grim the Hersir and joined in the attack when Ondott was killed. The earl said he had no money with him and asked to be able to pay later. Then Asgrim pressed the point of his spear against the earl's chest and told him to pay up at once. The earl took off his necklace, three gold rings and a velvet cloak. Asgrim took these valuables and gave him the nickname Audun Chicken.*²⁰²

²⁰¹ "Glossary." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 743.

²⁰² "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 12-13. Onund's attack on the property occurs on the same page.

Earl Audun, caught without money, gives up valuables which are on his person as compensation for the death of Ondott Crow. The narrator made sure to clarify the materials of this compensation, gold and velvet, indicating that it is the material and not necessarily the quantity which creates the value to resolve this debt.²⁰³ The labeling of these goods as “valuables” differentiates them from the money Audun does not have on his person. This separation of valuables and money aligns with the idea that money, in order to facilitate the exchange of goods, cannot hold no value of its own; these decorative items could not be considered money because they hold value.²⁰⁴ Graeber would agree; he remarks that items used for self-decoration are not money themselves, but they hold a similar capability for action. Items of self-decoration express two social powers similar to money: “the power [of the wearer] to act directly on others, and the power [of the wearer] to define [themselves] in such a way as to convince others how they should act.”²⁰⁵ Following Graeber’s theory, Asgrim accepts the cloak and jewelry instead of the expected money because he understands the wearing of these valuables will express to others his past exchange and will allow him the ability to exchange. Asgrim takes this compensation and along with a defamation of Earl Audun’s reputation considers the debt paid.

This debt settlement between Earl Audun and Asgrim is hurried and almost non-consensual, as Asgrim ambushes Audun and takes the compensation by force; their exchange is not overseen by the state, as King Harald, who holds a bias towards Earl Audun, is the state. Because Asgrim could not expect a state-sanctioned case to be fair, he resorts to this under-the-table approach. After Asgrim’s success, Onund leaves for Iceland and starts a life on

²⁰³ This is opposite the “large sum” of money offered to Aud by Eyjolf in “Silver for a Life.”

²⁰⁴ Graeber, David. “The Middle Ages (600 AD-1450 AD).” In *Debt: The First 5000 Years*: 281.

²⁰⁵ Graeber, David. “Action and Reflection, or Notes toward a Theory of Wealth and Power.” In *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*: 94 and 104.

the land provided by Eirik Snare. He and his family live a few years in peace before they must handle a death compensation case of their own. In this case, Ofeig Grettir, Onund Tree-leg's father-in-law has been killed:

*Thorbjorn [the Champion of Earls] kill[ed] Ofeig ... Ofeig's sons gathered a large party to bring the case against his slayer. They sent for Onund Tree-leg ... When Onund met his friends and kinsmen they invited him to stay with them. They discussed the case of Ofeig's killing and brought it before the Kjalarnes Assembly, because the Althing had still not been established at this time. The case was settled and heavy compensation was paid for Ofeig's killing, while Thorbjorn the Champion of Earls was sentenced to outlawry.*²⁰⁶

The fact that Ofeig's sons wanted many others at the ruling for no reason other than numbers reflects Iceland's lack of an executive authority; if the defendants wanted their due compensation, they had to acquire it through a display of force.²⁰⁷ The parties' use of a legal court contrasts immensely with Asgrim's secretive search for compensation. Settlers from Norway likely feared the monarchy's unbiased rulings just as Asgrim did, and from this past experience ensured that their new judicial system would contain none of the same oppressive authority. Within the legal setting that the settlers have formed, the law publicly mediates Ofeig's compensation case, held in check by the community.

This new involvement of the wider family and wider community in Icelandic death compensation marks a shift of who can collect this debt. The requirement of force to ensure the payment of compensation makes compensation a collective debt; if the guilty party refuses to pay compensation, action can be taken against them by not just the parents or children of the

²⁰⁶ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 16-17.

²⁰⁷ "Glossary." In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*: 742-743.

deceased, but by the larger family. Thus, the guilty party feels greater incentive to pay, and the peace-making function of death compensation has a wider social effect.²⁰⁸

Onund's generation established the precedent for death compensation in Iceland. Once the story reaches the protagonist Grettir's generation, the population of Iceland has expanded upon this precedent. Grettir himself becomes directly involved in a death compensation case due to his own bad actions. As a teenager, Grettir is traveling to the Althing with Thorkel Scratcher, a friend of his father, when he realizes that he has lost his bag of food. A farmhand named Skeggi offers to help search for it and finds a bag in the process; Grettir kills him for it. When the death is discovered, Thorkel explains to Grettir his options:

*"Things have taken a bad turn," said Thorkel. "Skeggi was sent to accompany me. He was from a good family and I will accept responsibility by paying whatever compensation is decided, but I have no control over whether a sentence of outlawry is passed. You have two options, Grettir: either go to the Thing and take the chance of what is decided there or turn back now." Grettir chose to go to the Thing and went on with them. The case was brought by the slain man's heirs. Thorkel undertook to pay compensation, but Grettir was sentenced to lesser outlawry and was banished from Iceland for three years.*²⁰⁹

In this case against Grettir, continuity is maintained from the precedent: the case is resolved publicly and in a legal setting. However, not everything about the system has remained the same. While previously only family (albeit far extended family) could involve themselves in the proceedings, now friends of the family can as well. Thorkel and Grettir share no kinship, yet Thorkel can take responsibility for Grettir, as Grettir was under his care during the offense. The

²⁰⁸ Sahlins, Marshall. "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange." In *Stone Age Economics*: 203-204.

²⁰⁹ "The Saga of Grettir the Strong," translated by Bernard Scudder. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*: 32.

boundaries of collectivized debt have only increased; therefore, more of society falls at risk if a case of death compensation fails in its peace-making.

Like the two cases before, this settling of death compensation does not clarify what form the compensation took or how much was paid. Because of this lack of information, we have no way of judging how the value of a life was measured materially. Original storytellers may have assumed the audience held contextual knowledge on this subject and therefore never bothered to include it in the stories; its exclusion means this information is lost to time. Or, perhaps the details regarding the compensation do not matter as much as the act of it. Like the Lawspeaker determined in “A Future in Iceland,” the symbolic act of reciprocity marks the end of an exchange; although debt may linger, the parties have provided for each other, creating peace and a new state of relationship between them.²¹⁰ The characters don’t haggle using measured means over the value of a life because they show the value of the deceased through the use of their death to reestablish peace.

Through the examples presented in “Compensation and Purchase,” we see the uses money and payment have within the characters’ gift-giving economy. Used to reinforce social roles and relationships, purchase doesn’t differ much from gift exchange in terms of its positive social function. Money, in contrast, can be used as a conduit for positive or negative social consequences; Eyjolf offers money in the hopes of breaking Aud’s kinship ties to her husband (a negative consequence) and yet money offered as compensation for death makes peace (a positive consequence). Money in the form of coinage began to be used across Iceland and Scandinavia just before the narrators’ time; although the general use of money for purchase and compensation

²¹⁰ Turner, Victor. “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage.” In *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*: 93-95.

in the sagas could have originated from oral tradition, its emphasis may reflect the narrators' desire to show points of connection between their present and the glorified past.²¹¹

4. Conclusion

In conducting this research, I explored how gift exchange in Icelandic sagas reveals the narrators' perception of a long-ago Iceland. My goal for this project was to add an anthropological and ethnographic perspective to the ongoing conversation surrounding these texts, and I hope I succeeded. Using an ethnographic approach allows us as researchers to investigate past societies in a way which accurately reflects their existence as inherently a historical narrative.

I have immensely enjoyed working with these texts and with the William & Mary Anthropology Department to complete this research. As my time with this project comes to an end, let me suggest avenues for future research involving gift exchange in these or other Icelandic sagas. First, due to time and page constraints, I did not get the chance to explore as much exchange within *Egil's Saga* as I would have liked; I can think of several scenes involving exchange off the top of my head which I believe would make great additions to this topic, such as Prince Eirik's ship, Skallagrim's axe and the poisoned drink served to Egil. Second, I didn't even touch whole categories of exchange, such as dowries and fostered children, because I knew discussing them would require time and space which I did not have for this project. I highly encourage future researchers to conduct analysis on those types of exchange I could not cover.

Finally, I was heartbroken that I could only select three of the many Icelandic family sagas to analyze; even three was a bit too much, given how much I had to neglect *Egil's Saga*.

²¹¹ Bagge, Sverre. "State Formation, Social Change, and the Division of Power." In *Cross & Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation*: 126.

The other sagas contain new characters and unique forms of exchanges described just as vividly as they were in these three pieces. I sincerely hope another scholar will pick up this torch and conduct their own analysis of exchange and social memory in these and other Icelandic sagas. There's so much more to be discovered!

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