

# The Protocol of Vengeance in Viking-age Scandinavia

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The Protocol of Vengeance in Viking-age Scandinavia seeks to discuss by whom and against whom vengeance was condoned in Northern Europe, namely Iceland, between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. In spite of both modern and contemporaneous portrayals of an excessively violent people, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the specific cases in which Viking society condoned and employed violence. To this effect, the paper will use particular examples from several major sagas, the only written records of pre-Christian Scandinavia, to outline the precise nuances of violence that corresponded with particular circumstances and stature of the individuals involved.

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From historical sources such as the *Annals of St. Vaast* to personal accounts from scholars like Alcuin of York, it is evident that the even the contemporaneous conception of Vikings included images of senseless barbarians who attacked the innocent, mainly Christians, and left behind nothing but devastation.<sup>1,2</sup> Violence in Viking society, however, was not haphazard, but rather part of an organized system of action developing over three centuries, based on the individuals involved in a feud and the corresponding method of settlement. Violence, especially in the form of vengeance, was both the opportunity and means for preserving honor in Viking-age Scandinavia and followed concrete principles. A protocol of appropriate vengeance can be proposed which, along with the examination of extenuating circumstances, can facilitate the comprehension of the rare written accounts of early Scandinavia, including *Njal's saga*, *Egil's saga*, *Hrafinkel's saga*, *Gisli's saga*, and the *Vinland sagas*. Though the events of the sagas took place largely in the tenth century, they were not transcribed by the Scandinavians

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Halsall, "The Annals of St. Vaast," in *Medieval Sourcebook: Three Sources on the Ravages of the Northmen in Frankland, c. 843-912* (Fordham University, Aug 1998), <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/843bertin.asp>, from *The Internet History Sourcebooks Project*, accessed 12 September 2012, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/index.asp>.

<sup>2</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of*

themselves until the late thirteenth century resulting in the influence of later social and political forces on the historical accounts. However, the sagas are the most proximate records of Viking-age Scandinavia and are thus extremely valuable to understanding this protocol of vengeance.

Contrary to the external interpretations of Viking culture, some as early as the tenth century from foreigners such as Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, early medieval Scandinavian society was largely based upon solid principles of honor and self-rule, particularly in Iceland and Greenland. Disputes often occurred over land, resources, or power, yet were often resolved legally. In Iceland, for example, these disputes could be taken to the Althing, a forum presided by elderly wise men.<sup>3</sup> If a just settlement, however, could not be agreed upon, these fairly isolated conflicts could easily snowball into a broadened, long-running feud because of the Viking code of retribution, which demanded appropriate action against a slight to one's honor or injury to a relative. Violence, even murder, perpetuated this cycle of revenge. This code of retribution can be broken down further into the following dimensions: the individuals involved, the appropriate actions as deemed by Viking society, and any extenuating circumstances, such as supernatural strength or the wronged party's reluctance to seek revenge.

The first element concerns the matter of who exacts revenge. This responsibility often falls upon the most closely related male kin present. Ties of obligation existed in several forms, for example between a father and his sons, between brothers, and between brother-in-laws. By removing the murder weapon from the victim's body, the individual agrees to the duty of seeking vengeance as evidenced in *Gisli's saga*: "[Thord] told [Gisli] to pluck the weapon out of the wound, for in those days it was a settled thing that the man was bound to avenge the slain who took the weapon out of the wound."<sup>4</sup> Gisli immediately complies with the code of avenging Vestein's death by removing the weapon. This process rarely becomes a matter of contention when another individual is present. In this

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*Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 2012), 14-5.

<sup>3</sup> "The History of Iceland," *Travelnet*, 2006, accessed 1 April 2012, [http://www.travelnet.is/about\\_iceland/history/](http://www.travelnet.is/about_iceland/history/).

instance, though another man named Thord is in the room, it is not appropriate for him to carry out the action as, firstly, he exhibits cowardice by claiming fear of the dead, and secondly, he is not compelled to be as invested in this matter since Gisli is Vestein's brother-in-law and is, thus, mandated by protocol to act. This scenario is not unlike Sam avenging the death of his brother, Einar, after Hrafnkel slays him for riding his horse in *Hrafnkel's saga*.<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, the individuals involved are not always so closely related or culpable. An extenuating circumstance can occur at the end of a chain of murders and revenge where the last individuals brought into the conflict before a resolution have little stake in the original issue. An example is in Hrafnkel's conflict with Sam, which originally started after the slaying of Einar. It escalates to the point where the innocent Eyvindr is killed despite having no cause and little involvement in the death of Sam's brother.<sup>6</sup> These exceptions are quite rare.

Secondly, the protocol of revenge is generally contingent upon the status of the initiator of the dispute. The more powerful the perpetrator, the more likely the victim's family would settle for compensation. If the initiator was of a far more elevated status than the victim and his family, the chain of retribution could be swiftly ended with a monetary compensation. An excellent example is in *Egil's saga*, when Thorolf is killed in battle because King Athelstan separates him from his brother Egil. Though Egil is furious, he understands that he cannot kill the king without suffering social and political ramifications. Instead, he displays extreme moodiness until he is granted a gift of a gold band from the king himself. "He [Egil] drew one eye-brow down towards the cheek, the other up to the roots of the hair... he would not drink." Finally the king relents and draws "his sword from the sheath and takes from his arm a gold ring large and good...reaches over the fire [and hands it]to Egil." This seems to be

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<sup>4</sup> "Gisli's saga." Chapter 8, in *Icelandic Sagas*, 2007, [http://sagadb.org/gisla\\_saga\\_surssonar.en](http://sagadb.org/gisla_saga_surssonar.en), from *The Icelandic Saga Database*, accessed 1 April 2012, <http://sagadb.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Hrafnkel's saga." in *Icelandic Sagas*, 2007, [http://sagadb.org/hrafnkels\\_saga\\_freysgoda](http://sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda), from *The Icelandic Saga Database*, accessed 1 April 2012, <http://sagadb.org/>.

sufficient compensation as Egil sat down because “he drew the ring on his arm, and his brows went back to their place.”<sup>7</sup>

An alternative approach of settling a dispute when the slayer is too strong is compensation in the way of blood-money. A relative of the slain individual could petition at the Althing for monetary compensation and a mediator would communicate between the families of the slayer and slain. The amount offered would correlate with the closeness of the individual with respect to the petitioner and importance of the individual in society. This option was accepted when the victim’s family was lower in status than the murderer out of fear of further conflict. Another reason for this type of settlement is if the murderer was thought to possess supernatural strength such as a *berserker*. These relatively rare individuals possess ferocious strength, oftentimes unleashed in uncontrollable fits of rage.

Thirdly, taking vengeance against a relative of biological ties or foster alliances is strictly prohibited. In the Vinland Sagas, Freydis, Leif’s sister, orders the slaying of two brothers, Helgi and Finnbogi, in Vinland for no apparent reason. Rather than react in outrage to Freydis’ hindering of the settlement process, Leif does not raise a finger against his sister. Instead he claims, “I do not have the heart to punish my sister Freydis as she deserves, but I foresee that her descendants will enjoy little prosperity.”<sup>8</sup> As if the gods agreed, fate ensured that “it turned out as he said, for from that time on, no one thought anything but ill of them.” It is clear that Leif acknowledges the wrong in her actions but cannot commit another grievous error, the murder of a sibling, to compensate.

The confounding factor of supernatural strength can also compound the impropriety of killing a relative. When Egil’s father, Skallagrim, attempts to kill his own son in a *berserker* rage, his efforts are barely thwarted by Egil’s nanny, whom he chases off a cliff. He even throws a boulder after her to

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<sup>6</sup> "Hrafnkel's saga," Chapter 6, in *Icelandic Sagas*, 2007, [http://sagadb.org/hrafnkels\\_saga\\_freysgoda](http://sagadb.org/hrafnkels_saga_freysgoda), from *The Icelandic Saga Database*, accessed 1 April 2012, <http://sagadb.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> W. C. Green, *Egil's saga*. Forgotten Books, 2008. 133.

<sup>8</sup> "Vinland Sagas," Chapter 15; accessed 1 April 2012, [http://archive.org/stream/voyagestovinland013593mbp/voyagestovinland013593mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/voyagestovinland013593mbp/voyagestovinland013593mbp_djvu.txt).

ensure her death: “Skallagrim hurled after her a great stone, which struck her between the shoulders, and neither ever came up again.”<sup>9</sup> Though Egil is furious, it is not appropriate for him to attempt to kill his own father, nor is it practical, due to Skallagrim’s supernatural strength. Thus he decides to exact revenge by killing his father’s favorite worker. “He went into the fire-hall, and up to the man who there had the overseeing of work and the management of moneys for Skallagrim, and was most dear to him. Egil dealt him his deathblow.” Though the workman meant much to Skallagrim, he could not deny that it was just compensation for his action. “Skallagrim spoke not a word about it then, and thenceforward the matter was kept quiet.”<sup>10</sup>

Another extenuating circumstance is hesitance to exact revenge, which can be construed in two ways. The more common way is similar to Freydis’ plans to coax her husband into action against the alleged wrongs she suffered by Helgi and Finnbogi by attacking his honor: “You are such a measly man that you would never avenge either my disgrace or your own. I am certainly finding out how far I am from Greenland. But, if you do not avenge this, I am going to separate from you.” She drove her husband to his wits end until “he could no longer bear her reproaches.”<sup>11</sup>

Rarely, reluctance to participate in violence is a sign of nobility and wisdom as in *Njal’s saga*. After her children were called “little dungbeards” and her husband was called “the beardless one,” Bergthora flew into a rage. She threatens the honor of all the men in her family, even her children. “If you don’t avenge this insult, you can’t be counted on to avenge any!” she directs at Skarphedin, her son, and Njal, her husband. Njal, however, responds calmly: “Slow but sure, mother! And so it is with many things that try men sorely. There are always two sides to a quarrel, even though we avenge this insult.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, Njal does not exhibit cowardice because he hesitates to fight, but he demonstrates his good sense

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<sup>9</sup> W. C. Green, *Egil’s saga* (Forgotten Books, 2008), 95.

<sup>10</sup> W.C. Green, *Egil’s saga* (Forgotten Books, 2008), 96.

<sup>11</sup> “Vinland Sagas,” Chapter 13, accessed 1 April 2012,

[http://archive.org/stream/voyagestovinland013593mbp/voyagestovinland013593mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/voyagestovinland013593mbp/voyagestovinland013593mbp_djvu.txt).

<sup>12</sup> Lee Hollander, *Njal’s saga* (Ware, Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1999), Section 88.

and wisdom by stating it is most likely not warranted or that the insults stem from an unknown cause or trap.

The intricacy and complexity of vengeance demonstrated by the major sagas can be broken down into these repeated elements facilitating their comprehension. The first pattern is that the more closely related by blood, the greater the need to avenge another's murder. The second is that the more powerful the perpetrator, the more likely the victim's family will settle for monetary compensation. Third and most importantly, vengeance through murder is not employed against one's own family. Though these trends are not all encompassing, they must be given more credit than just serving as motifs in thousand-year-old texts. They illuminate the limited written record of the Scandinavian past. Thus, the elucidation of such facets is essential to forming an accurate picture of Viking-age Scandinavia.

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