

The King and I? : An Analysis of Social Class and Loyalty in the *Sagas of Icelanders*

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At the height of Viking history, social class was an ever present feature of society from the Scandinavian mainland to the distant colonies of the western isles and Eastern Europe. Although the class system of the Vikings was stratified and decided by birth with little to no social mobility, individual and group loyalties often blurred the lines between ruler and subject. These complex allegiances between entities such as class, kin, and one's own self were important aspects of life. Nowhere else is this theme more apparent than in the *Sagas of Icelanders*. Through analysis of *Egil's Saga* and the *Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, loyalty can be seen as the central defining exception to the class system of Viking society.

Scholarship

Scholarship pertaining specifically to social class in Viking society is difficult to come by. Although there is a fair amount of research that focuses on slaves and the slave trade, overall class studies seem to be severely lacking. Through research into many scholarly and sudo-scholarly works it seems that class, compared to other subjects like raiding and sailing, is often just briefly glimpsed over when discussing society or social structures. This deficiency in the scholarly body of Viking history may very well be correlated with the general feeling of uncertainty many primary sources leave behind. Where some vague law code or accepted social norm may affirm a rigid social structure, a saga could contradict a well as support through its complex interlace of loyalties. This difficulty is what many scholars have had to work around in the past century, and is exactly what this paper intends to address directly.

In one of the earliest secondary works on Viking history, *the Viking Age (1889)* by Du Chaillu, the author claims that “from very early times the people of the North [Scandinavians]

were divided into classes”¹. Chaillu also claimed that through the *Rigsmal* poem alone there can be found 5 definite classes, “the *slave*; the *karl* or *bondi*; the *jarl*, and the *hersir*”². In Chaillu’s overall analysis of various sources he even lists a possible 7, “Konung, Jarl, Hersir or Lendmann, Hauld, Bondi, Leysingri, and Thrall”³. Similarly scholars such as William R. Short (2010), Magnus Magnusson (1980), and Kirsten Wolf (2004) acknowledge the possible existence of classes that varied more or less with Chaillu’s list. All of these authors do however seem to agree on three major class categories existing. These categories are slaves (Thralls, unfree), free men (the broadest class including everyone from tenants to chieftains), and Nobles (chieftains, earls, kings, and titled men). With the exception of Iceland in which the “traditional Scandinavian social structure was flattened”⁴, as many people moved there to escape the oppressive unilateral monarchy, this system is largely how society was structured throughout North West Europe.

Du Chaillu also pointed out that “this demarcation into classes was acquiesced in by the people of the land, for it could not have existed a single moment without their will”⁵. The Scandinavian peoples came to accept their stations in society as it was reinforced by “their surroundings and their Mode of Life”⁶ from birth until death. Although detailed, and more or less accurate compared the other works listed earlier, perhaps Du Chaillu’s most important insight on

¹Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 486.

² Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 486.

³ Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 491.

⁴ William R. Short, *Icelanders in the Viking Age: the People of the Sagas* (London: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010), 32.

⁵ Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 486.

⁶ Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 486.

Viking social class is his claim that “no man was allowed to rule over the people unless he excelled in many things”⁷. Much more modern scholarship agrees with Chaillu’s assumptions (although not directly referencing him) regarding the will of the populous and the need of higher classes to be remarkable in many ways. In this an important research question is raised. If all leaders had to excel in many things, how much prowess could separate one noble from another?

The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction by Julian D. Richards is a brief but thorough map of Viking history. Published in 2005, it serves as a modern secondary source of the main features and theories that are in the scholarly dialogue today. Although the work does not have a section that focusses on the origins of class and the structure of society, it does mention it as an important aspect of the various colonies that the Scandinavians settled.

When discussing Iceland and how it was founded Richards claims that contrary to the belief that farmers were more or less equal, “medieval Icelandic society comprised several hundred powerful farmers each in control of a considerable number of people on his own estate and having political authority over up to 3,000 lesser farmers”⁸. Iceland showed a good example of the society of Scandinavians upon their first arrival, including the families of *Egil’s Saga* and *the Sagas of the People of Vatnsdal*. Roberts also points out that “Land ownership was the basis of economic as well as political power. Livelihoods depended upon stock-breeding, supplemented by fishing and fowling, rather than cereal cultivation”⁹. As a side note when discussing the colonies of Greenland and the theories behind why they failed, Roberts claims that, parallel to the Scandinavian mainland, “Farmers lived in a stratified society controlled by

⁷Paul B. Du Chaillu, *The Viking Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 486.

⁸ Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 103

⁹Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 103

powerful chieftains and church officials. The social and economic structure rested upon payment of tithes to landowners, the church, and the Norwegian crown”¹⁰. This system along with many other factors including nationalistic (meaning also systemic) and occupational pride, made the Greenlanders unwilling to adapt and thus spelt their eventual abandonment of the Greenland settlements. This unilateral structure is exactly what the characters in the sagas will be confronting.

Primary Sources

For the purpose of the paper, the only primary sources used are the Icelandic sagas that are being analyzed in conjuncture with existing scholarship. The Saga’s of Icelanders are an impressive collection of stories based around wealthy and prominent Icelandic figures of the late first millennia. In the past century these sagas have been criticized more and more for their questionable authenticity. This is due to the presumption that most of them were written down in the 13th century by Snorri Sturluson, a medieval Scandinavian aristocrat. Even though Snorri wrote the sagas several centuries after the events in the sagas took place, he did it by piecing together existing written works and oral traditions. Yes, there is a good case against the extent of their use as accurate historical depictions. However, questionable the material may be, it has not stopped many scholars in the past 123 years from Du Chaillu in 1889 to Anne Pederson in 2014 from using them in their works. This repeated use suggests that although they are not exactly history, their credibility is up to the discretion and interpretations of the scholar.

Prologue: Resistance towards Unilateral Rule

¹⁰ Julian D. Richards, *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 115

In Egil's Saga, social class and loyalty clash from the very beginning. Starting chronologically at the beginning of Egil's saga, King Harald Tangled-Hair has begun his conquest of Norway. When many people rise up against Harald's aggression, King Audbjorn calls upon Kveldulf, the eldest of Egil's line in the saga, to join in the fight against Harald with him. However Kveldulf, a wealthy farmer of some upper class renown, is not convinced the conflict involves him at all, even if his king requests it. He replies "I don't think it's any duty of mine to go up north to more and fight there to defend other people's land... I have a feeling Harald has plenty of good fortune in store for him, but our king doesn't have enough to fill the palm of his hand"¹¹. Kveldulf declines the request of his king to defend the land that he has no connection to, but which he knows will eventually lead to the fall of the province he does live in.

This conflict between king and subject so early in the text is significant. Kveldulf outright denies the request of his Konung (king) on the grounds that he has no obligation. This suggests that at least with the upper class farmers, who are considered by Kirsten Wolf to be "the most important class"¹² in Viking society, loyalty was specifically a domestic issue when it came to rulers and subjects. That is if it doesn't directly involve oneself or ones kingdom, rulers had little authority. This also suggests a disdain for unilateral authority in a culture where no one could, let alone should, be prominent in society unless they possessed significant personal prowess.

Attempts at Reconciliation between Independence and Servitude: Act I

In the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal, this question is echoed. How much prowess and respect separates the classes and when is it legitimate? The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal is an interesting source in this regard. In the saga there are prominent characters who out right support

¹¹ Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 10.

¹² Kirsten Wolf, *Daily Life of the Vikings* (London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 107.

a king, but then also live their lives separated from that kind of direct authority. A good example of a character like this in the saga is Ingimund, the founder of Vatnsdal. One summer when Ingimund is raiding with his friend Saemund they came upon a battle between King Harald Tangle-Hair and local chieftains. Seeing this Ingimund declares “All the mightiest men in the land are committed here; but I think that King Harald is the worthiest of them”¹³. Ingimund would then go into battle for King Harald believing it right to support an excellent leader who could also reward his loyalty. This was a normal thing for a good warrior to do at the time. As Anne Pederson pointed out “generosity was a mark of the worthy ruler” and “Loyalty was rewarded and the gifts served as a reminder to all of the donor’s wealth and status”¹⁴. Interesting enough, Saemund an equally stout warrior “would not risk his life for the king’s sake; and he took no part in the battle”¹⁵. Unlike Ingimund, Saemund did not think any benefit that could come from loyalty to the king would be worth wagering his life. This could very well be Saemund also recognizing the downside of being in the king’s service rather than independent. Even Ingimund advises him that “it seems to me not a bad idea for you to head for Iceland, as many worthy men do these days who cannot be sure of defending themselves against the power of the king”¹⁶. Through the suggestion by Ingimund, who chose the king’s side, that one could defy the king and still be worth his stock is important. This odd duality of loyalty could very well be an

¹³ Snorri Sturluson, “the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 201.

¹⁴ Anne Pedersen, “Power & Aristocracy” *Vikings life and legend* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2014), 128.

¹⁵ Snorri Sturluson, “the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 201.

¹⁶ Snorri Sturluson, “the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 203.

attempt by Ingimund to reconcile with the traditional independence of his culture and the fast expanding centrality of rising kingdoms.

Attempts at Reconciliation between Independence and Servitude: Act II

Returning to Egil's Saga, the subject of social class, loyalty and allegiance becomes even more complex. At this time now Harald Tangel-Hair is the king of a large swath of Norway including Kveldulf's province. It is arranged that relations between Kveldulf and King Harald should be more or less the same as it was between his family and the last king. However pressure by this more powerful king and the opportunity that he offers persuades Thorolf, Kveldulf's son, to join King Harald. Just like Ingimund and to other Vikings, the offers of rewards for loyalty were very enticing.

Thorolf in response to Harald's offer "swore allegiance to the king and joined his followers"¹⁷. Likely this agreement was both for the wealth and prestige he could acquire as well as for the protection of his family and kinsmen, some of which join King Harald as well. From here on Thorolf's life takes a defining pivot away from that of his father's.

As the years pass Thorolf does everything from fighting in wars for Harald to becoming nobility under him administrating whole districts of Norway and collecting taxes and tribute. However while under the title given to him by Harald, Thorolf becomes a potential threat with his wealth and influence. When the king is told a lie about Thorolf's loyalty being questionable, he gives Thorolf the opportunity to leave his post and once again join his personal guard. But in

¹⁷ Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 16.

doing this Thorolf would have to give up his own war party that had been with him through most of his rise to prominence.

In a system where, according to Scholar Magnus Magnusson, “conspicuous wealth and ostentatious generosity were considered virtues” and “Loyalty to ones lord was reinforced by the distribution of largesse”¹⁸, taking away such an entity would not be a simple demand.

Thorolf replies “I am reluctant to relinquish this band of men... you will decide my title and the privileges you grant me, king, but I will not hand over my band of men for as long as I can provide for them”¹⁹. As a side note, similarly to his father this act is another refusal by a wealthy free man, the request of his king.

Interestingly enough, of all things, Thorolf seems mainly concerned with losing his band of warriors. This perhaps can be attributed to warriors and their chieftains having a personal loyalty to each other. Perhaps more pertinently this could also be seen as an attempt by Thorolf to reconcile with a culture where men of prowess only have so much authority over each other, and with the life he had been living under the king.

This time, the king is not just asking, he is giving a direct command. Harald makes Thorolf an adversary of his kingdom, fulfilling the intuition of his father Kveldulf “That the way things would turn out for you would not bring good fortune to any of us” and when Thorolf visits his family and spreads the news Kveldulf continues “I have an intuition that this will be our last meeting”²⁰. At this moment the saga could be making a statement that alliances with those who

¹⁸ Magnus Magnusson, *Vikings* (New York: Elsevier-Dutton, 1980), 18.

¹⁹ Snorri Sturluson, “Egil’s Saga” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 27.

²⁰ Snorri Sturluson, “Egil’s Saga” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 32.

have power and who are also not kinsmen, the center of trust for most Scandinavians, is always dangerous to oneself and one's family.

Either way Kveldulf's intuition is ultimately proven correct when Harald traps Thorolf at his farm. Harald gives Thorolf one chance to give up, "If Thorolf is prepared to surrender and put himself at my power and mercy... then his life and limbs will be spared but his men will be punished as they deserve"²¹. This chance however shows another emphasis on the bands of men Thorolf has under his command and patronage, again suggesting that perhaps warriors that are together for periods of time are more loyal to each other. It could also be suggesting that the king has a no tolerance policy towards men, even under his own command, who have a level of power even close to his own. The latter of which would be a stark contrast to the more flattened (short) social structure wealthy farmers like Thorolf practiced.

In one last act of independence against the system he tried to reconcile with, Thorolf replies "I will not accept any settlement that the king tries to force on me"²². Soon a fierce battle ensues, but Thorolf is eventually slain along with many of his men.

Kin or Konung? : Act III

Soon after the death of Thorolf, a surprising event occurs. Thorolf's kinsmen Olvir Hump and Eyvind Lamb, who are highly trusted by the king, show a partiality towards their fallen kinsmen even if he was an outlaw and hated by the king they serve. One says to the king "My brother and I would like to ask your leave to return to our farms, because after these recent

²¹Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 35.

²² Snorri Sturluson, "Egil's Saga" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 35.

events we are not in the mood to sit and drink with the assailants of our kinsmen Thorolf”²³.

Although they are the king’s most trusted members of his party, they still seem to hold family at a high if not equal level of priority, at least morally, as they cannot stand to be around those who killed a member of that trust centered group. Once again there is a duality present that works against the principles that the king is trying to establish in his conquering of Norway. Although Harald eventually lets one return to his home, this duality would soon become too much of a strain on his power.

When Harald’s own foster sons are killed by Thorolf’s family in revenge, it’s the last straw and the flood gates open. A sweep is initiated to kick out or eliminate all those closely related to Thorolf who wasn’t already a part of Haralds train. “The king’s animosity towards Kveldulf and his son grew so fierce that he hated all their relatives or others close to them, or anyone he knew had been fairly close friends. He dealt out punishment to some of them and many fled to seek sanctuary elsewhere, in Norway or left the country completely”²⁴. Although this was clear revenge by Harald it is also a convenient excuse for him. In a bid to solidify his power must Harald must get rid of those who can prove a threat. This is a substantial sign that at this time mixed loyalties seriously hampered any attempts for centralized power.

Kin or Myself? : Act IV

In the Saga of the People of Vatsndal, loyalties run more clearly but also perhaps much deeper than in the other sagas. But this does not keep other factors from skewing loyalties in certain circumstances. From the start Family is the biggest player in the lives of the people of Vatsndal, which is a village in Iceland. The protagonist, Thorstein, is in a dilemma with himself

²³ Snorri Sturluson, “Egil’s Saga” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 37.

²⁴ Snorri Sturluson, “Egil’s Saga” *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Bernard Scudder (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 49.

and his father. He has not done much with his life and is not as big and strong as his father. He feels disgraced by his father's words that it would "better serve his kinsmen honour if there were a gap in the family line rather than having him"²⁵. This remark, as one could imagine in such a culture, strikes very deep and drives Thorstein on to either win fame or die trying.

In an interesting turn of events, Thorstein kills the bandit that singlehandedly plagued the roads leading outside of Vatnsdal. Thorstein actually could have been killed along with the bandit had the bandit chosen, however "because of your [Thorstein's] daring and manliness"²⁶, he is released along with a wish by Jokul the bandit that he help take care of his family. Although Thorstein is hesitant at first, considering he's never been referred to as a man of prowess before, he later tells his father, who is now jubilant of his son's being alive. His father however doesn't want him to put his life in the hand of enemies, to which Thorstein replies "I will carry out my promise to Jokul; and even if I bring neither foot back in one piece, I will go there just the same"²⁷. This event in particular shows an importance to family. Not wanting to shame them with mediocrity, Thorstein risk his life to bring them and himself honor. The End of the scene however, shows a tittering loyalty between family and the duties of a man who has not only a life debt, but more importantly has made a promise based on his own honor.

Epilogue

²⁵ Snorri Sturluson, "the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 192.

²⁶ Snorri Sturluson, "the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 193.

²⁷ Snorri Sturluson, "the Saga of the People of Vatnsdal" *the Sagas of Icelanders*, Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 194.

Scandinavian society in the late first millennia was characterized by a stratified class system. Although there were clear differences and boundaries between slaves and nobility, to say the class system was rigid would be overstatement. As the sagas have shown in conjecture with the secondary works, class did not absolutely define a person. Before class could really take hold in society it had to be juggled along with a complex set of allegiances to ones kin and one's own honor/self-interest. Personal prowess meant little if someone couldn't show an equal amount of respect to people just as remarkable or influential. The rise of kings seeking unchallenged authority was in direct confrontation with the culture of the time, and would eventually shape the geopolitical future of Iceland and the Scandinavian nations.

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