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Understanding the balance of power in Eastern Iceland : Some remarks on the "Saga of the Men of Svinafell"

Średniowiecze Polskie i Powszechne 5 (9), 62-85

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Some remarks on the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell**

One can talk of a feuding system of conflict resolution if one understands under this designation both vengeance and the processes of reconciliation and if one perceives the codes and the limits of the legitimate violence as the study of feuding societies suggests.

Dominique Barthélemy

The study of conflicts in the Middle Ages finds a rich soil in Iceland. With an abundance of feuds — either petty local wars or private vengeance — and of bigger conflicts, the historian of medieval Iceland sometimes has difficulty in distinguishing historical documents from fiction. In Iceland the narrative sources known as “sagas” constitute a valuable testimony for the historian of medieval societies with a particular focus on conflicts¹. Stories of feud and feuding game often drive the narration of the Icelandic sagas. For a long period their narrative aspect relegated them to fiction. It was only with the influence

* This article was written with the financial help of a scholarship from the Institute of Strategic Research of the École militaire (IRSEM). A French version of this paper was presented at a conference held at the University of Caen on the 17 February 2012 on the historical value of the sagas. I am grateful to Pierre Bauduin and Hans Jacob Orning for their precious comments during the conference. All errors of interpretation, mistakes, omissions, remain my own responsibility.

¹ On the use of the sagas for the historical knowledge of Icelandic society see H. Þorláksson: *Að vita sann á sögunum. Hvaða vitneskju geta Íslendingasögurnar veitt um íslenskt þjóðfélag fyrir 1200?* “Ný saga” 1987, Vol. 1, pp. 87—96.

of the American school of historical anthropology, which reached its climax in the 1980s with the works of William Ian Miller, that the sagas of the Icelanders began to attract many historians². Following the publication of his work, historians began to treat the accounts found in the sagas more historically in order to reconstruct the mechanisms of these conflicts. In a recent article, the Icelandic historian Helgi Þorláksson proposes a definition of the feud in medieval Iceland which follows eight points based mainly on a comparison of the typologies of feud established previously by Black-Michaud, Boehm, Byock and Miller³. But until now it is mostly the famous sagas of the Icelanders, or family sagas, that have been used for this type of study, despite their literary aspect⁴. Curiously, the contemporary sagas, though considered as more valuable historical sources on the Age of the Sturlungs, did not attract the focus of historians working on conflict. It should be noted that in his latest study Helgi Þorláksson chooses to analyse two sagas of the Icelanders, *Laxdæla saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga*, though he stresses the importance of the contemporary sagas, and mostly the *Saga of the Sturlungar*, for the study of conflict. Nevertheless, an exception should be made concerning the work of the Icelandic

² W.I. Miller: *Choosing the Avenger: Some aspects of the Bloodfeud in Medieval Iceland and England*. "Law and History Review" 1983, Vol. 1, pp. 159—204; Idem: *Justifying Skarphedinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud*. "Scandinavian Studies" 1983, Vol. 55, pp. 316—344; Idem: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking. Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago 1990. See also the work of J.L. Byock: *Feud in the Icelandic saga*. Berkeley 1982; Idem: *Medieval Iceland. Society, Sagas and Power*. Berkeley 1988. On the influence of the anthropological school on Icelandic saga research, see G. Karlsson: *A century of research on Early Icelandic Society*. In: *Viking Revaluations, Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14—15 May 1992*. Eds. A. Faulkes, R. Perkins. London 1994, pp. 15—25; and H. Þorláksson: *Hvað er blóð hefnd?* In: *Sagnabing: Helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. Apríl 1994*. Eds. G. Sigurðsson, G. Kvaran, S. Steingrímsson. Reykjavík 1994, pp. 389—414.

³ H. Þorláksson: *Feud and Feuding in the Early and High Middle Ages. Working Descriptions and Continuity*. In: *Feud in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Eds. J.B. Nøtterstrøm, B. Poulsen. Aarhus 2007, p. 74: "Feud is a state existing between two individuals or groups. The initial dispute may arise from insignificant causes but honour compels people to react unrestrainedly, leading to the development of an acrimonious atmosphere between the parties involved. There are clashes between the opposing parties, and the dispute turns into feud when violence is brought into use, with violent acts being perpetrated subsequently by each party in turn. These acts typically involve the damaging of property or livestock, and even personal assaults. The chief characteristic of the feud is that the violence is limited by the fact that the participants repay each other blow for blow, but the level of violence usually escalates gradually. If any individual is killed in the course of these hostilities, leading to the perpetration of vengeance killing, a blood feud may be said to have developed. During the feud the original issue of contention becomes continually less significant as circumstances provide ever more new and pressing matters demanding vengeance. A mutual concern with honour prevents the adversaries from seeking settlement themselves and it is necessary for some third party to intervene in order that the opposing parties may be reconciled".

⁴ The definition of conflict proposed by Helgi Þorláksson is drawn mostly from examples given in the sagas of the Icelanders. See *ibidem*, pp. 76—77.

historian Jón Viðar Sigurðsson who, in his doctoral thesis, analyses one saga from the corpus of the *Saga of the Sturlungar*. *Þorgils saga og Hafliða* is given an example of a saga illustrating a conflict which exists between the chieftains Þorgils Oddason from Staðarhóll and Hafliði Másson from Breiðabólstaður, in early 12th century Iceland⁵.

Conflict plays an important role in the sociopolitical events of the 13th century. Conflict and the feuding game will often tip the scales in favour of one powerful leader. Following the constitution of 930, Iceland adopted a system of chiefdoms (*goðaveldi*) divided presumably into 36 and later 39 chieftains. The power was non-territorial and though local chieftains possessed an influence on their direct neighbourhood, they had to bow to the local assemblies in every legal matter. Yet around 1190, a change took place in the balance of power as we observe the rise of bigger territories that we name “lordships” (sing. *héraðsríki*, pl. *héraðsríkja*), ruled by important families. Around this time, in the area of Eyjafjörður, a chieftain decided to seize power and to build up an important territory encompassing a region previously ruled by 5 or 6 chieftains. Similar changes occurred in the areas of Borgarfjörður, Vestfirðir, Rangárþing and Skagafjörður. At the dawn of the Age of the Sturlungs (1220—1242) we face an island divided into six lordships ruled by powerful families: the Haukdælir in Árnesþing, the Oddaverjar in Rangárþing, the Ásbirningar in Skagafjörður, the Vatnsfirðingar in Ísafjörður, the Sturlungar of Hvammur in the Dalir and finally the Svínfellingar in the Austfirðir. The process of consolidation of power and the beginning of the Age of the Sturlungs is characterized by constant conflict between the various families who fought in order to impose their hegemony on their neighbours⁶.

The objective of this study is to analyse the role and the function of conflict in the balance of power in the Eastern Quarter of Iceland around the mid-13th century. The conflict will be analysed through two main accounts: the Icelandic annals and a less well-known saga, the *Saga of the Men of Svínafell* (*Svínfellinga saga*). Until now, none of the studies dealing with conflict in Iceland have taken this saga into consideration⁷. Moreover, facing the scarcity of studies concerning the Eastern Quarter, it seems interesting to examine this saga under the scope of conflict in order to offer an alternative perspective

⁵ See J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*. Odense 1999, pp. 151—156.

⁶ J.V. Sigurðsson: *Frá goðorðum til ríkja. Þróun goðavalds á 12. og 13.öld*. Reykjavík 1989; S. Jakobsson: *The Process of State-formation in Medieval Iceland*. “Viator” 2009, Vol. 40 (2), pp. 151—170; it is the main argument of the doctoral dissertation of G. Cattaneo: *Des chefferies aux seigneuries: pouvoir et société dans l’Islande médiévale (930—1264)*. Paris, forthcoming.

⁷ J.L. Byock: *Feud in the Icelandic saga...*, p. 272, writes some lines about this saga in the category “direct resolution of the conflict” in the hands of the Abbot Brandur. By doing so, he neglects a mechanism of regulation of conflicts representative of 13th century Iceland.

on mechanisms of conflict resolution in medieval Iceland — more precisely around the middle of the 13th century. The available accounts on this conflict will be presented first according to the annalistic sources and then according to the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell*. The focus will be on the value of the sagas over the Icelandic annalistic sources. We will try to stress why the historian should not neglect the narrative sources when attempting to reconstruct the sociopolitical events of the 13th century. We will then study the sequence of the feuding game and the way in which the local elites are presented in this saga. Alliances and violence will also be studied as an important aspect of the feuding game. Finally, we will see how conflict resolution and the peace-making process work according to this example.

The annals and the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* as historical sources

The Icelandic annals mention a conflict which occurred in the district of the Síða in 1248, 1251 and 1252. Contrary to the sagas, the annals do not constitute a narrative genre but consist of short abridgements for each year. Eleven annals compose the Icelandic annalistic corpus⁸. Most scholars do not give any credit to the annalistic sources due to their late composition; they take the accounts given in the annals as contemporary writings after 1300⁹. This hypothesis is reinforced by the influence of some excerpts from the contemporary sagas — which were already written around this date — on some passages of the annalistic writings. A scholar Beckman, however, proposes an older date for the composition of some parts of the annals. According to Beckman, the oral tradition of genealogic writings, which we find in the annals, may date back to the first half of the 12th century¹⁰. Finally, the Icelandic scholar Jónas

⁸ The Icelandic annals are the *Resensannáll* (Annales Reseniani), the *Forniannáll* (Annales Vetustissimi), the *Høyersannáll* (Henrik Høyers Annaler), the *Konungsannáll* (Annales regii), the *Skálholtsannáll* (Skálholts-Annaler), the *Annálsbrot frá Skálholt* (Annalbrudstykke frá Skálhot), the *Lögmannasannáll* (Lögmanns-annáll), the *Gottskálksannáll* (Gottskálks Annaler), the *Flateyjarannáll* (Flatøbogens Annaler), the *Oddverjaannáll* (Oddverja Annáll) and the *Nýiannáll*. For this study, we are using the edition of G. Storm: *Islandske Annaler indtil 1578*. Christiania 1888.

⁹ Ibidem, p. lxxiii. The historical value of the Icelandic annals is still debated today among specialists, see for instance H. Eldbjørg: *The Icelandic annals as historical sources*. “Scandinavian Journal of History” 1997, Vol. 22, pp. 263—274.

¹⁰ N. Beckman: *Annalstudier*. “Studier i Nordsik Filologi” 1912, Vol. 3, pp. 1—12.

Kristjánsson invites us to use the annals in order to establish a connection with the sagas of the Icelanders¹¹. Following his example we choose to study the annalistic sources as similar to other writings from the 13th century, produced by a similar milieu, i.e. the Icelandic elite. It is as a product of this time that we consider the annals a historical source.

Events from the Síða district in the Eastern Quarter of Iceland appear in many annalistic accounts. The knowledge of the conflict that opposed the elites of this area, and its resolution, can be found in accounts from many places in Iceland, according to the place of redaction of these texts. We learn in the *Høyersannáll*, under the entry 1248, that a tension exists between two persons, Sæmundur and Ögmundur, but we do not know the cause: “Beginning of the discord between Sæmundur and Ögmundur” (*Hofz missætti Sæmundar oc Ogmundar*¹² [...]). Three years later, this “discord” (*missætti*) becomes a “conflict” (*deild*¹³). The testimony of the *Høyersannáll* does not appear in the other ten annals; but in 1251 a similar testimony appears in three annalistic versions: “Conflicts in the Eastern fjords” (*deildir austfirðinga*). Indeed, we read “Deildir Avstfirðinga” in the *Re-sensannáll*, “Deildir austfirðinga” in the *Høyersannáll* and “Deildir austfirðinga” in the *Skálholtsannáll*¹⁴. The other eight annals do not mention the events that occurred in the Eastern Quarter. In 1252 we learn about the “death of the sons of Ormur, Sæmundur and Guðmundur”¹⁵. This event seems to be important, as accounts appear in eight annals — only three fail to mention it: *Annales vetustissimi*, *Flatø-annaler* and *Oddverja Annall*. The original Icelandic text does not differ to a large extent between the different annalistic variants. The text focuses on the death of the sons of Ormur and the additions in the variants concern only their first names: Sæmundur and Guðmundur¹⁶. The *Høyersannáll* are the most

¹¹ J. Kristjánsson: *Annálar og Íslendingasögur*. “Gripla” 1980, Vol. 4, pp. 295—319.

¹² G. Storm: *Islandske...*, p. 66. For the translation of *missætti* as “discord,” see *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*. Eds. R. Cleasby, G. Vigfússon, W. Craigie. Oxford (1874) 1957, p. 432.

¹³ We translate *deildir*, the plural of the substantive *deild* as “conflict.” If the polysemy vacillates between “hostility” and “quarrel,” it seems that in this case the term “conflict” is large enough to cover the violent nature of these exchanges as we are facing an armed conflict within the Icelandic substantive. See J. Fritzner: *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*. Vols. 1—3. Oslo (1883—1896) 1931, p. 242; *An Icelandic-English Dictionary...*, p. 98.

¹⁴ G. Storm: *Islandske...*, pp. 26, 66, 191.

¹⁵ The substantive *víg* common in Old Icelandic is translated as “homicide” when it is found in a legal text. *An Icelandic-English Dictionary...*, p. 715, goes further explaining that any crime committed with the help of a weapon within an armed conflict or a feud should be covered by the term *víg*. By choosing to translate more loosely as “murder” I am hoping to reconstruct the laconic style of the annals; see J. Fritzner: *Ordbog...*, p. 938.

¹⁶ G. Storm: *Islandske...*, p. 26: “Vig Ormssona Semvndar og Guðmundar”; p. 66: “Vig Ormssona”; p. 132: “Vig Sémvndar ok Gvðmunndar Ormssona”; p. 191: “vig Sæmundar og Guðmundar Ormssona”; p. 257: “vigh Sémundar Orms sonar”; p. 329: “Vig Sæmundar [Ormsonar og Guðmundar] brodur hans”; p. 482: “Wijg Sæmundar og Gudmundar Ormsona”.

complete in regards to the three main tracts of information: in 1248 the discord starts between Sæmundur and Ögmundur; in 1251 there are “conflicts in the Eastern fjords,” and in 1252 they end tragically with the “death of the sons of Ormur”. It would seem that the events that occurred in the Eastern Quarter made an impression on the contemporaries — at least enough to feature in the annals. This illustrates the value of the narrative sources for the historian who desires to learn more about an event yet finds only bits and pieces of a story in the analogistic sources. Without the testimony of the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* we would not know much about the origin of the conflict, the sequence of events, the part of the mediation, the resolution and the last judgment that ends the quarrel.

In his literary study of the sagas of Icelanders, Theodore M. Anderson proposes an interesting angle. Each saga of the Icelanders encompasses six aspects: the introduction, the conflict, the climax, the vengeance, the reconciliation and the consequences¹⁷. The conflict is important in this division as it represents the backbone of the saga. It gives a special character to the narration in the form of narrative unity and dramatic tension. We should try to see if this division can be applied to a contemporary saga from the *Sturlunga saga* such as the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell*. This saga belongs to the compilation known as the *Saga of Sturlungar*, which depicts the sociopolitical events of 12th- to 13th-century Iceland. They are grouped in the “contemporary saga” genre, along with the bishop sagas (*Biskupasögur*), which depict events concerning mostly the religious protagonists of Iceland between 1056 and the mid-14th century. The corpus of the *Saga of the Sturlungar* was composed by various authors and was probably assembled by Þórður Narfason, a lawman from Skarði in Skaðrsströnd, around 1300¹⁸. Historians maintain a special relationship with this compilation, as their vision of 13th-century Iceland depends for the most part on the *Saga of the Sturlungar*¹⁹. Within a corpus of twelve texts, the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* appears last; the four other sagas are generally edited, as they can be found in independent versions²⁰. As with the rest of the

¹⁷ T.M. Andersson: *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytical Reading*. Cambridge 1966, pp. 3—30.

¹⁸ It is important to notice that the debate is lively in Iceland. In his most recent article, H. Þorláksson: *Sturlunga — Tilurð og markmið*. “Gripla” 2012, Vol. 23, pp. 53—92, proposes the person of Þorsteinn böllóttur Snorrason (†1353?), one generation younger than Þórður Narfason (†1308), as a compiler.

¹⁹ For a good overview of the questions raised by this saga genre see Ú. Bragason: *Sagas of Contemporary History (Sturlunga saga): Texts and Research*. In: *A companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. Ed. R. McTurck. Oxford 2005, pp. 427—446. On the role of Sturla Þórðarson, the author of the main saga of the corpus, and his function among our understanding of this society see G.Á. Grimsdóttir: *Sturla Þórðarson*. In: *Sturlustefna*. Reykjavík 1988, pp. 9—36.

²⁰ The texts composing the corpus of the *Saga of the Sturlungar* are: *Geirmundar þáttur heljarskinns*, *Þórgils saga og Hafliða*, *Ættartölur*, *Sturlu saga*, *Sturlunguformálinn*, *Prestsaga*

Saga of the Sturlungar, the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* appears in two medieval manuscripts, presumably from the 14th century: the *Reykjafjarðarbók* and the *Kroksfjarðarbók*. From the 141 vellum that originally composed the *Kroksfjarðarbók*, only 110 have reached us; from the *Reykjafjarðarbók* we have only 30 vellum of 180. The scientific edition of the saga draws its text from these manuscripts. According to philologists, the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* was added to the corpus of the *Saga of the Sturlungar* at the end of the 13th century²¹. In a recent study on the variants within the two 14th-century versions of the *Saga of the Sturlungar*, Guðrún Nordal points out, regarding the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell*, that “significant additions are made to *Svinfellinga saga* in *Reykjafjarðarbók*, particularly in relation to Þórður kakali and his men”²². Here she puts forward the point of view of Pétur Sigurðsson, who supposes that some chapters from the 1946 edition of the *Sturlunga saga* originally belonged to *Íslendinga saga*, and are missing from the *Kroksfjarðarbók*²³. Guðrún Nordal argues that “it seems unlikely that the editor of *Kroksfjarðarbók* would have omitted these chapters, and therefore it seems plausible that they were introduced by the editor of *Reykjafjarðarbók*”²⁴. It should be noted that these chapters deal mostly with events concerning Þórðurkakali and his relationships with the main protagonists of the saga, Sæmundur Ormsson and Ögmundur Helgason. In other words, these excerpts link the local events of the Men of Svinafell from the Síða with the Sturlungar and the rest of Iceland. One may suppose that the original version of the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell*, found in the *Kroksfjarðarbók*, was more focused on the local life of the Eastern Quarter of Iceland without connection to the Sturlungar and thus independent from the rest of the sociopolitical events of the Age of the Sturlungs.

Guðmundar Arasonar, Guðmundar saga dýra, Íslendinga saga, Haukdæla þáttur, Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar, Þórðar saga kakala, Svinfellinga saga. The texts existing in independent versions are: *Þorgils saga skarða, Sturlu þáttur, Jarleinarsaga Guðmundar biskups, Árna saga biskups*. For more information about this list, see Ú. Bragason: *Ætt og saga. Um frásagnarfræði Sturlungu eða Íslendingasögu hinnar miklu*. Reykjavík 2010, pp. 25–27.

²¹ The latest edition of the saga offers a good volume of research concerning the manuscript tradition: *Sturlunga saga, Árna saga biskups, Hrafn saga Sveinbjarnarsonar hin sérstaka*. In: *Sturlunga saga*. Vols. 1–3. Ed. Ö. Thorsson. Reykjavík 2010, pp. xv–xxxix [later abbreviated *Sts I, Sts II or Sts III*]. In particular *Sts III, Skýrningar og fræði*. Two ancient studies deal with this saga and its manuscript tradition: R. Heller: *Studien zur Svinfellinga saga*. “Arkiv för nordisk filologi” 1964, Vol. 79, pp. 105–116, and S. Björnsson: *Svinfellinga saga og höfundur hennar*. “Goðasteinn: tímarit um menningarmál” 1967, Vol. 6 (1), pp. 3–8.

²² G. Nordal: *Rewriting History. The Fourteenth-Century Versions of Sturlunga saga*. In: *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*. Eds. J. Quinn, E. Lethbridge. Odense 2010, p. 183.

²³ P. Sigurðsson: *Um Íslendinga sögu Sturlu Þórðarsonar*. In: *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenzkra bókmenta að fornu og nýju*. Vol. 6/2, pp. 94–99.

²⁴ G. Nordal: *Rewriting History...*, p. 183.

The saga is divided into thirteen brief chapters relative to the time of the narration²⁵. It offers a unique case study of the area of the Síða, in the Eastern Quarter of Iceland, around the middle of the 13th century. The first two chapters provide the reader with information on the area, its government, the main characters of the story and the existing hierarchy within the local society. At the end of the second chapter the relationship between the characters is qualified: “All these people were on very good terms”²⁶. But if we look closer at the original Icelandic text, we find the notion of friendship: “Með þessum öllum mönnum var góð vinátta.” Friendship (*vinátta*) was a particular type of relationship within the Icelandic society of the time, with particular obligations and duties²⁷. People were tied to their chieftain by the bond of friendship. One can suppose that this peaceful situation lasted for a while, as the local chieftain Ormur Jónsson is described as “the most admired of all secular leaders in Iceland at that time: he had done the best job of all of them at steering clear of the warfare and chaos embroiling most of his contemporaries yet had managed to hold his own against them all”²⁸. Thus his friendship with Ormur would establish a connection between the members of the local elite. Ormur Jónsson would maintain the peace in the area and spare his men from the internal trouble of the Age of the Sturlungs; in return they would respect him, and follow him in his affairs. But the narration of the saga breaks down in September 1241 with his death. As the local chieftain was also the owner of the *goðorð* (*goðorðsmaður*) of the Síða, the issues of conflict between the two local leaders of the area, Sæmundur Ormsson and Ögmundur Helgason, result from troubles regarding inheritance following Ormur Jónsson’s death. As Ormur Jónsson was the father of Sæmundur and the brother-in-law of Ögmundur, they both have a claim to the position of *goðorðsmaður*. Therefore, the gap left by the death of the chieftain is quickly filled by the greed of the two other protagonists who entered the lists for this office. The time of narration stretches from 1248 to 1252, four years in which the conflict between the sons of Ormur and Ögmun-

²⁵ The text used in this paper is the one of *Sts* I—III. The *Saga of the Men of Svínafell* (*Svínfellinga saga*) can be found in the second volume, from chapter 358 to 371, pp. 550—566. The English translation is offered by R. Ringler: *The Saga of the Men of Svínafell. An Episode from the Age of the Sturlungs*. In: *Saga og språk: Studies in language and literature*. Ed. J.M. Weinstock. Austin 1972, pp. 9—30.

²⁶ *Sts* II, p. 551.

²⁷ Friendship in medieval Iceland has been the object of numerous studies. See for instance J.V. Sigurðsson: *Friendship in the Icelandic Commonwealth*. In: *From Saga to Society*. Ed. G. Pálsson. London 1992, pp. 205—215; J.V. Sigurðsson: *Forholdet mellom frender, hushold og venner på Island i fristatstiden*. “Historisk Tidsskrift” 1995, Vol. 74, pp. 311—330; V. Pálsson: *Power and Political Communication. Feasting and Gift Giving in Medieval Iceland*. University of California, Berkeley, unpublished PhD thesis 2010, mostly pp. 2—18, 97—129.

²⁸ *Sts* II, p. 551.

dur remains vivid. As T.M. Anderson noted concerning the sagas of the Icelanders, this conflict constitutes the backbone of the saga. In Table 1, the main events have been presented according to the place of conflict in relation to the structure of the saga²⁹. Each chapter of the saga is built around an escalation of animosity between the two main groups. If the beginning and the sequences of each stage of the conflict involve Party A of Sæmundur Ormsson and Party B of Ögmundur Helgason, the settlement of the conflict is due to Party C of the Abbot Brandur Jónsson. Party C is prominent in the saga and acts not only as a witness but also as an agent of the conflict. Both Party A and B require the help of Party C, and accept its judgment. The troubles of each stage subside given the commitment of C. But stages I and II of the conflict do not end with a clear resolution; it is only after the tragic death of the leaders of A during stage III that C concludes that B is guilty and thus settles the conflict.

Table 1

The conflict as structure of the saga

Episodes	Party A: Sæmundur Ormsson	Party B: Ögmundur Helgason	Mediation C: Brandur Jónsson
Stage I — 1	Pauper transferred to a tenant of B	Pauper escorted back by B	×
Stage I — 2	Vengeance and violence towards the men of B and their properties	B asks for the mediation of C during the assembly	×
Stage II — 1	Alliance of A with Þórður kakali. Assault of Kirkjubær with 80 men	Escape of B	×
Stage II — 2	Assembly, A supported by Þórður kakali wins the case	B condemned to proscription at the assembly. A plunders his property	C imposes a truth between A and B
Stage III — 1	A and 3 men visit the farms of the district	12 men of B ambush A	×
Stage III — 2	The sons of Ormur are executed by B and another man from A is mutilated	B punished by C is condemned to exile with his followers	Kirkjubær goes to a man of C (a priest)

²⁹ This table is inspired by the work of H. Þorláksson: *Feud and Feuding...*, p. 76.

The feuding game and the local elite

The feud involves two opposed groups. The origin of a feud is usually mixed and does not always rely on kinship ties; yet the local aspect of the saga and the stake of the feud tighten the relations between the groups and make it a family matter. As stated previously, Ögmundur Helgason is the uncle of Sæmundur Ormsson by marriage. His wife, Steinunn Jónsdóttir, is the sister of Ormur Jónsson and Brandur Jónsson. Both parties master the use of violence, and there are many casualties. The two deaths in the conflict are the brothers Sæmundur and Guðmundur — as stated in the annals — and occur towards the end (stage III). The casualties are carefully compensated for. A notion of “my turn, your turn” is evident in this process, and the men keep in mind the number of deaths and casualties. When a historian analyses the situation using ideas of power and wealth, it becomes clear that the participants believe that an affront to their honour remains the main source of the conflict. In these societies the feud is ruled by cultural norms, and there is a possibility of resolving the conflict either temporarily or permanently through accepted codes. The parties involved in the conflict do not necessarily precede the beginning of the dispute; the feud can start without a murder or blood shed between the parties. For example, in the aforementioned case the feud officially begins with the imposition by Sæmundur Ormsson of a pauper (*ómagi*) to a farmer of Ögmundur Helgason³⁰. One can be given to wonder why such a minor event will eventually bring things to a head. But beneath the surface this event concerns directly the main stake of the feud, i.e. the inheritance of the management of the Síða. Indeed, according to the law only the local chieftain had the power to evaluate the property of the householders who were able to provide for a pauper³¹. By doing so he shows Ögmundur who, in fact, is in charge of the region.

The remainder of the feuding sequence is quite similar to the rest of saga literature in that the feud is clearly the driving force behind the narration. The whole saga follows rules of narration, which depend on the evolution of the dispute between the party of Sæmundur and the party of Ögmundur. In his typology of conflicts in medieval France, Patrick J. Geary explains that conflicts exist either between similar groups — family against family, monastery against monastery, lord against lord — or between differing groups — laymen

³⁰ Well noted by W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking...*, p. 151, who does not pursue the analysis of the event.

³¹ *Grágás. Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid. Udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift og oversat af Vilhjálmur Finsen, for det nordiske Literatur-Samfund*. Vols. 1—4. Copenhagen 1852—1870 [Abbreviation by *Grágás 1a* or *1b*] — Vol. 1b, pp. 1—28; Vol. 2, pp. 103—151.

against clerics, kinship against feudal clientship; secular clergy against regular clergy³². His case study of the area of Chorques presents all the variations on these schemes of opposition, contrary to the area of the Síða. This difference might stem from two similar aspects of the Svínfellingar's domain: a low population density in the Eastern Quarter due to the lie of the land (wilderness of the highland, glaciers and sandy coastal areas), and the poor living conditions of the inhabitants of this area, which does not allow enough social differentiation to develop between the local elite. According to Jón Viðar Sigurðsson "[...] the Svínfellingar's domain was too poor, in relation to its size, for its leaders to be able to assert themselves in the nationwide power struggle"³³. Yet throughout the other texts of the *Sturlunga saga*, it can be seen that the Age of the Sturlungs (1220—1262) demonstrated an increase in social differentiation, with a diversification of the semantic field of the elite³⁴. But the description of the society in this saga is surprising given its use of archaic vocabulary, which is closer to that of the sagas of the Icelanders. The distinction between social groups does not appear in the imprecise vocabulary of the saga. For instance, the term "householder" (*bóndi*) is used without any distinction between peasants and members of the rural elite such as Ögmundur Helgason. This latter belongs to a powerful family of the region and is married to a member of the ruling family of the Svínfellingar. The technical term for Ögmundur's function in the area should be "owner of the church establishment" (*staðarhaldari*) of Kirkjubær, like his father Digur-Helgi³⁵. The "church establishment" (*staðir*) or, in Latin, *beneficium*, represents an important source of income as the tithes were collected there following their introduction into the Icelandic balance of power in 1096—1097³⁶. The owner of the church establishment usually re-

³² P.J. Geary: *Vivre en conflit dans une France sans État. Typologie des mécanismes de règlement des conflits (1050—1200)*. "Annales ESC" 1986, 41, Vol. 5, p. 1113.

³³ J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power...*, pp. 80—81. He evaluates the population of the area between 3,000 and 6,000 inhabitants. For the connections of people from the East fjords with the rest of the medieval Icelandic society, see S. Jakobsson: (*A*)*ustfirskur og hafði orðið sekur um konumál. Um rými, tengslanet og félagslega einangrun Austfirðinga í íslensku miðaldasamfélagi*. In: *Landsbyggðarrásteftna Sagnfræðifélags Íslands og Félags Þjóðfræðinga á Íslandi haldin á Eiðum 3.— 5. júní 2005. Ráðstefnurit*. Ed. H. Lárússon. Egilstaðir 2006, pp. 23—29.

³⁴ J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power...*, pp. 85—86, 198; O. Vésteinsson: *A Divided Society: Peasants and the Aristocracy in Medieval Iceland*. "Viking and Medieval Scandinavia" 2007, Vol. 3, pp. 117—139 and S. Jakobsson: *The Process of State-formation in Medieval Iceland...*, *passim*.

³⁵ This word is a recent construction made by Icelandic historians. Medieval sources usually use the term *staðarmenn*, see *An Icelandic-English Dictionary...*, p. 586.

³⁶ Important studies on the *staðir* have been conducted by some Icelandic historians; see for example J.V. Sigurðsson: *Frá goðordum til ríkja...*, pp. 96—98; Idem: *Chieftains and Power...*, pp. 100—119; M. Stefánsson: *Staðir og staðamál. Studier i islandske egenkirkelige og beneficalrettslige forhold i middelalderen*. Bergen 2000, and more recently the general work

ceived half of the tithes, controlled the income of the churches, the priests and the cemeteries and also the taxes connected to religious offices such as funerals and other Christian ceremonies. As a consequence, the reference to Ögmundur as a “householder” throughout the text can be misleading, as it overlooks his real importance in the region.

In the same way, the author mentions at the beginning of the saga that the Svinfellingar are a lineage of owners of *goðorð* (*goðorðsmenn*). The *goðorð* correspond to a symbolic power closely tied to the chieftaincy, which consists in the right of representation at the General Assembly³⁷. The reasons for why Sæmundur tries to establish his legitimacy over the district not only as a local ruler but also as the *goðorðsmaður* of the Síða seem clear. It is noteworthy to remark that the text never uses the term chieftain (*höfðingi*) in reference to Sæmundur, though it is used to designate his father Ormur, who is named both “chieftain” (*höfðingi*) and “householder” (*bóndi*), and also his uncle Brandur: “notable chieftain” (*ágætur höfðingi*). Should this imprecision be understood as a will from the author to deny the legitimacy of Sæmundur? Or should it be supposed that, for the author, the terminology does not signify anything in this particular area, where the local elite is nothing more than *primus inter pares*³⁸? But suppose for a moment that for unknown reasons the terminology used by the author does not correspond to the real status of the local elite. As an argument it should be pointed out that both characters establish a friendly contact with the powerful Þórður kakali Sighvatsson, from the Sturlungar lineage. The text describes the extent of his authority: “since the death of Brandur Kolbeinsson [19 April 1246], he had possessed sole authority over the entire Southern and Northern Quarters [of Iceland], Gizurr [Þorvaldsson] then being

directed by H. Þorláksson: *Church centres. Church Centres in Iceland from the 11th to the 13th Century and their Parallels in other Countries*. Reykholt 2005.

³⁷ This institution has been the object of numerous studies. See for example K. Maurer: *Das Staatsrecht des isländischen Freistaates*. Leipzig 1909, p. 208; A. Heusler: *Das Strafrecht der Isländersagas*. Leipzig 1911, p. 209; Ó. Lárusson: *Goði og Goðorð*. In: *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*. Vol. 5. Reykjavík 1960, pp. 363—366; M.M. Lárusson: *Mansbot. Island*. In: *Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder*. Vol. 11. Reykjavík 1966, pp. 335—337; J.R. Mirbeau-Gauvain: *Høvdingerne i det middelalderlige Island*. “Tidsskrift for Rettsvitenskap” 1981, Vol. 94, pp. 472—480; Idem: *Le godord islandais*. «Revue historique de droit français et étranger» 1982, Vol. 60, pp. 45—66; L. Ingvarsson: *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn*. Vols. 1—3. Egillsstaðir 1986—1987; H.S. Kjartansson: *Fjöldi goðorða samkvæmt Grágás. Erindi flutt á málstefnu Stofnunar Sigurðar Nordals 24.—26. júlí 1988*. Reykjavík 1989; J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power... passim*; G. Karlsson: *Goðamening, staða og áhrif goðorðanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga*. Reykjavík 2004, pp. 179—202.

³⁸ This ancient position was developed by the legal historian A. Gregersen: *L'Islande. Son statut à travers les âges*. Paris 1937, p. 52. His hypothesis is based on legal codes as valuable historical material for the reality of medieval Iceland. See footnote 35 for the recent historical works arguing against this position.

abroad”³⁹. Sæmundur weds his niece, proof that the Svínfellingar are, in the Eastern Quarter, equivalent to the Sturlungar in the rest of Iceland. With this alliance, Þórður kakali promises Sæmundur his support in his dispute with Ögmundur. It is clearly stated, during a conversation between Þórður and Ögmundur, at a moment when Sæmundur has just won against the latter in the assault of Kirkjubær, that the possession of a *goðorð* is, for the local elite, important as a mark of authority and power. Ögmundur runs away from the region and goes to Þórður kakali for advice. It is said: “Ögmundur related his difficulties to Þórður who replied that Ögmundur would find it easy to give in to Sæmundur on all occasions, “since you’re a man of much greater substance. Besides, you’re more popular with the farmers; and I’ve even heard that though you don’t have the authority of a *goði* (*goðorð*), the farmers are as loyal to you as to Sæmundur. And though Sæmundur is related to me by marriage, I certainly don’t condone his persecuting anyone. And please stay here with me as long as you like”⁴⁰. The advice of Þórður kakali shows that, contrary to Sæmundur, Ögmundur can count on the support of many householders from the East. His mid-elite status reinforces the balance of his relationship with the other householders. Throughout the saga, Ögmundur does not act like a chieftain; he abuses his power in the same way as Sæmundur when dealing with the farmers of Ögmundur. It seems that the friendship existing within this community at the beginning of the saga, from the time of Ormur, still exists between Ögmundur and the householders of the Síða. This hypothesis can explain why Sæmundur seeks help from outside the region and contracts an alliance with one of the Sturlungar.

In the struggle for the ownership of the *goðorð*, the conflict generates a larger social environment. First of all, two powerful leaders are involved in the opposition: the first, Brandur Jónsson, within the area, and the second, Þórður kakali, outside the area. The inhabitants of the Síða have to redefine their allegiance. The original statement “all these people were on very good terms” is no longer relevant; the inhabitants will become either the followers of Sæmundur Ormsson or the followers of Ögmundur Helgason (see Table 2). The loyalty of clients and friends will evolve as the saga progresses, with, for instance, the role played by indecisive persons such as Svartur Loftsson and Egill skyrhnakkur. The feuding game redefines the boundaries of the social groups and creates new groups and alliances. The hierarchy presented at the beginning of the saga is at stake, and the heir of Ormur Jónsson is not the only one claiming inheritance of the charge of *goðorðsmaður* of the Síða. Table 2 shows that Ögmundur Helgason is followed by twelve householders, members of the local elite; Sæmundur Ormsson is followed by seven. This situation illustrates

³⁹ *Sfs* II, ch. 365, p. 557.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, ch. 363, p. 557.

Table 2

Followers of Sæmundur and of Ögmundur

Sæmundur Ormsson	Indecisive persons	Ögmundur Helgason	Mediators
Þórður kakali Guðmundur Ormsson Þorsteinn Skeggjason Klængur Skeggjason Fjárgarður austmaður Hafur-Teitur Helgi Loftsson	Svartur Loftsson Egill skyrhnakkur	Snorri sveimur Þórarinn Snorrason Árni gullskeggur Jón karl Ögmundarson Brandur Guðmundarson Pétur Grímsson Móðólfur djákni Halldór í Tungu Þorsteinn hrakauga Sigmundur Ögmundarson	Brandur Jónsson Steinunn Jónsdóttir Álfheiður Njálisdóttir Skeggi Njálsson

the statement of Þórður kakali, mentioned previously: Ögmundur is more popular among his peers than is the legitimate heir of Ormur Jónsson. The conflict alters the balance of power in the region, as all the followers constituting the two enemy groups originally belonged to the same social group: the assembly men of the *goðorðsmaður* of the Síða. The tie between the chieftain (*goði*) and his assembly men (*þingmenn*) which, according to the *Grágás*, forms the basis of the Icelandic institutional system, is disrupted in this conflict⁴¹. According to Miller, this tie bore no sacred aspect such as that which may be found in the tie of vassalage⁴². But again, his examples are mostly taken from the sagas of Icelanders and the reconstitution of an older period of Icelandic history. I demonstrated in an earlier article that the notion of loyalty (*trú*) was essential to the ties between men in 13th-century Iceland⁴³. Moreover, I pointed out the existence of an oath of fidelity (*trúnaðareidur*) in the Age of the Sturlungs, which probably originated from continental and feudal customs through Norwegian influence⁴⁴. The *Saga of the Men of Svínafell* is highly interesting to this extent, as it offers two examples of this oath of fidelity out of the ten present in the corpus of the *Sturlunga saga*. After his victory in battle against Ögmundur, Sæmundur sends a man to the followers of Ögmundur in order to arrange a meeting: “Proceeding from the assumption that they had been guilty of an uprising against him since they were his *þingmenn*, he offered them two alternatives: either they would swear him an oath of allegiance [*trúnaðareidur*], or he would confiscate their property or maim them. The farmers deemed it

⁴¹ *Grágás* 1a, pp. 140—141 and *Grágás* 2, pp. 277—278.

⁴² W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking...*, pp. 22—26, 165, 240, 242, 305.

⁴³ G. Cattaneo: *The oath of fidelity in Medieval Iceland. A tie of feudal allegiance*. “Scandinavian Studies” 2010, Vol. 82, pp. 21—36.

⁴⁴ The latest — and to this day most valuable — study of the kingdom of Norway and its connections to feudal Europe has been made by H.J. Orning: *Unpredictability and Presence: Norwegian Kingship in the High Middle Ages*. Leiden 2008.

the better part of wisdom to swear him and his brother an oath not to align themselves against them, an oath that note they all parted”⁴⁵. This example is edifying and illustrates both the tie between the chieftain and his assembly men and the nature of the oath of fidelity. The first is drawn from the law codes and works in the public sphere; the second is more private and personal in that allegiance is sworn to one leader. It can be noticed that the grammar of the ties between men in Icelandic society of that time became more personal through use of the oath of fidelity.

This episode also illustrates the function of violence in this society. Sæmundur threatens to plunder and hurt his assembly men unless they swear allegiance to him. The Icelandic expression *að hann mundi taka limar þeirra* is an euphemism for mutilation followed by murder. But one should notice that the implications of violence are mostly symbolic and rarely evolve into action. The use of violence remains limited and restrained in spite of the conflictual situation⁴⁶. The reader should bear in mind that, in the feuding game, this type of conflict divides members of one community into two groups. After the settlement of the dispute, the community must return to a situation of peace similar to the beginning of the saga. The various stages of the conflict illustrate an intensification of violent acts. The first act of violence in the saga is symbolic through humiliation of the opponent: Sæmundur Ormsson entrusts a pauper to the care of Höskuldur, a farmer, and rival of Ögmundur. The violence is then directed toward the properties of Ögmundur’s clients. Though the mediators control the violence between the members of the elite, they do not really intervene when the matter concerns only householders or dependants of persons of power. Persons of modest status become scapegoats in the feuding game between the members of the elite. In this case, Sæmundur Ormsson does not directly attack his opponent, but commits evil acts against three of Ögmundur’s clients. It is only after a failed trial and the fair arbitration of Brandur during the General Assembly that Sæmundur decides to directly attack his opponent: he assaults the farm of Kirkjubær with the help of a coercive force. But again, in spite of the number of warriors in each party, the violence remains limited. Both parties prefer to use a deterrent force and thus push the other party to give up. Facing defeat, Ögmundur decides to ask for reinforcement in order to dissuade Sæmundur’s troupes from attacking. If one looks at the terminology developed by Helgi Þórláksson, this conflict does not correspond to a “blood-feud” by its origin or by the unfolding of its plot, but only by its resolution⁴⁷. The blood aspect of the feud appears only after the murder of the two brothers,

⁴⁵ *Sts* II, ch. 363, p. 557.

⁴⁶ On the limitation of the violence and its symbolic function within the medieval society, see for instance the viewpoint of S.D. White: *Repenser la violence. De 2000 à 1000*. «Médiévales» 1999, Vol. 37, pp. 99—113.

⁴⁷ H. Þórláksson: *Hvað er blóðhefnd?...*, *passim*.

Sæmundur and Guðmundur. This feud does not find its origin or its essence in the vengeance of blood shed between the two parties, but in the insult made by Sæmundur to the honor and social status of Ögmundur. Thus the vengeance is not only connected to physical violence, but is also symbolic⁴⁸. During the Age of the Sturlungs, the competition for the acquisition of regional power became the real driving force behind conflict and vengeance as a just means of action. This situation is diametrically opposed to the one produced by the world of the sagas of the Icelanders, in which vengeance is the backbone of conflict. Although the strike concerning the quest for power resulting from the acquisition of the inheritance of Ormur seems to disappear from the narration leaving only questions of honour and vengeance, one should realize that, in fact, that it still remains. As a consequence I can state that the society of the Age of the Sturlungs, despite its reputation of anarchy, was truly ruled by a “feuding order”.

Conflict resolution and the peace-making process

The law codes of 13th-century Iceland are filled with details concerning the process of peace-making. William I. Miller conducted an important study on the relationship between the sagas and the law codes⁴⁹, but some historians think that, during the Age of the Sturlungs, the model offered by the law codes could no longer correspond to the social reality. There was a relation of cause and effect, with the phenomenon of consolidation of power starting in 1190, and the fact that the *Grágás* presented a model corresponding to the period prior to 1150⁵⁰. This is something Miller understood by, for the most part, comparing the narrative material of the sagas of the Icelanders. The decrease in chieftaincies and the apparition of lordships could no longer support the model described in the law codes. The *Saga of the Men of Svinafell* illustrates

⁴⁸ On the function of violence in Icelandic society and other feuding societies see the seminal article of W.I. Miller: *Getting a Fix on Violence*. In: Idem: *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence*. Ithaca—New York 1993, pp. 53—92, 77. His idea of violence and retaliation was later developed in his book *An Eye for an Eye*. Cambridge 2006.

⁴⁹ W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking... passim*.

⁵⁰ J. Jóhannesson: *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. Íslendinga saga*. Winnipeg 1974, pp. 226—239; G. Karlsson: *Goðar og bændur*. “Saga” 1972, Vol. 10, pp. 5—57; Idem: *Goðamenning... passim*; J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power... passim*.

this problem: the local assembly of Skaftafell seems to be under the control of the local chieftain Sæmundur Ormsson. In chapter 365 he attends the assembly along with an important group of men and the support of a powerful lord, Þórður kakali Sighvatsson, and his men. In the absence of powerful men able to challenge him, he wins in the trial against Ögmundur without any trouble, and thus condemns him to the court of execution (*féransdómur*). The opposition parties remain silent, and it can be said that the legal system is inefficient and easily controlled by the game of the elite.

Therefore, to have recourse to mediators remains the only way to resolve the conflict and maintain the peace and certainty in the region⁵¹. From the beginning, the narrator of the saga speaks highly of the Abbot Brandur: “he was a notable chieftain and a good cleric, wise and benevolent, a man of many friends and great authority. He was the most highly regarded of all men living in Iceland in those days”⁵². He is chosen by the two parties as the main arbitrator of the conflict, and acts in the public space. They sometimes trust his judgment against all common sense. It should be pointed out that this blind trust leads Sæmundur to underestimate his opponent, and thus to his tragic fate. At the end, in spite of his actions, Ögmundur puts his fate in Brandur’s hands. The saga is filled with commentaries praising his qualities as arbitrator: “and it seemed to everyone that the abbot had emerged from the dispute with the highest honours as usual”⁵³. Sæmundur’s conviction of Ögmundur to the court of execution was largely due to the absence of the abbot at the assembly. Without his presence, as a member of the local elite with a great influence, nobody was able to thwart the plans of Sæmundur.

Two other characters, similar due to their genre and status of mistress of the house (*húsfreyja*), affect the sequence of events in a more private way. Álfheiður Njálisdóttir is the widow of Ormur and the mother of Sæmundur and Guðmundur; Steinunn Jónsdóttir is the sister of Ormur Jónsson and the wife of Ögmundur. In chapter 363 one can evaluate the importance of their role in the saga⁵⁴. Álfheiður interferes at the moment in which the brothers decide to

⁵¹ On the function of peace messages within this saga see the article of E.S. Ólafsdóttir: *Friðarboðskapur Svinfellinga sögu*. “Mímir” 1999, Vol. 38 (47), pp. 22—29.

⁵² *Sts* II, ch. 358, p. 550. A biographical note about him and his role in the area was written by H. Pálsson: *Brandur Jónsson ábóti*. In: *Dynskógar: rit Vestur-Skaftfellinga*. Vík 1999, pp. 70—91.

⁵³ *Sts* II, ch. 362, p. 553.

⁵⁴ Important secondary literature can be found on the place of women in Old Norse society. The function of women in the feuding game according the sagas of Icelanders has been the focus of some studies unfortunately approached too often through the prism of gender studies. See for example the treatment of the *Saga of Burnt-Njall* by H. Kress: *Ekki höfu vér kvennaskap. Nokkrar laustengdar athuganir um karlmennsku og kvenhatur í Njálu*. In: *Sjötiú ritgerdir helgada Jakobi Benediktssyni. 20. júlí 1977*. Eds. E.G. Pétursson, J. Kristjánsson. Vol. 1. Reykjavík 1977, pp. 293—313, which analyses the conflict as an extrapolation of a dis-

attack Kirkjubær, and tries in vain to reason with the youngest: “she pleaded with him [Guðmundur] not to go along with Sæmundur on this expedition in view of the honourable and friendly treatment he had received from Ögmundur”⁵⁵. The role of adviser, known in the feudal society under the Latin term of *concilium*, as a duty of the vassal, is not only the prerogative of the assembly men or the clients in medieval Iceland⁵⁶; in the private sphere, women assume the function of telling the male protagonists that which seems best. Moreover, their intimate position allows them to tell their opinions more freely to their nearest. In the same way, blood and marriage ties influence the weight of the women’s advice towards their nearest kin. Here, the notion of honour structures the argument of Álfheiður. If one considers the caution of the historian Dominique Barthélemy in regards to an abusive anthropological approach to history, the role of honour can, in this case, only be understood if we place it in the more general context of feuding societies⁵⁷. Ögmundur became foster father to Guðmundur following the death of his father Ormur. Ögmundur’s kind deeds toward Guðmundur during this period should be understood as a private contract between them, though it should be stressed that the notion of honour is evident within the public sphere, as it puts at stake the way in which the community will look at Guðmundur and thus at the whole family. For fear of dishonour, Álfheiður warns her son against pursuit of a feud with Ögmundur. Following this advice Álfheiður disappears from the narration and leaves enough space for the second female character, Steinunn, the paternal aunt of

pute between the two women of the saga, Hallgerður and Berþóra, who persuade the men to fight throughout the narration. Still with this saga, see C. Anderson: *No Fixed Point. Gender and Blood Feuds in Njal’s Saga*. “Philological Quarterly” 2002, Vol. 81, pp. 421—440. More recently, J.K. Friðriksdóttir: *Women in Old Norse Literature. Bodies, Words, and Power*. New York 2013, proposes to analyse in a less ideologically charged view the dispute existing between women according to three stages: the attack, the counter-attack and the resolution with the question of honour as a backdrop, pp. 17—25.

⁵⁵ *Sts* II, ch. 363, p. 554.

⁵⁶ On the role of women as advisors in conflicts see *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*. Eds. S.M. Anderson, K. Swenson. New York 2002, and also the enlightening work of J.K. Friðriksdóttir: *Women in Old Norse Literature...*, pp. 25—45. Women are also much aware of respect and honour matters, as demonstrated in S.U. Pálsdóttir: *Hlutu konur enga virðingu*. In: *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*. Reykjavík 2001, pp. 41—55.

⁵⁷ P. Bourdieu: *Le sens de l’honneur*. In: Idem: *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique*. Genève 1972, pp. 15—43; Idem: *The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society*. In: J.G. Peristiany: *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Chicago 1966, pp. 191—242. On the use of honour as a value of a feuding society, see among other works of this historian, D. Barthélemy: *Chevaliers et miracles. La violence et le sacré dans la société féodale*. [np] 2004, pp. 25—44, and Idem: *La paix de Dieu dans le monde de la faide*. In: *Hommes et sociétés dans l’Europe de l’An Mil, Presses Universitaires du Miral* (Tempus). Eds. P. Bonassie, P. Toubert. Toulouse 2004, pp. 307—315. Icelandic scholars produced an interesting book on honour in medieval Iceland: *Sæmdarmenn. Um heiður á þjóðveldisöld*. Reykjavík 2001.

the brothers. Later in the same chapter, when Ögmundur asks her who comes close to his farm during the night, she explains to her husband: “I don’t need to puzzle very long about that: This will be my kinsmen, Sæmundur and Guðmundur. For God’s sake — and for your own — don’t compound your difficulties with my relatives”⁵⁸. Here the wife warns her husband about the unfolding of conflict. The position of Steinunn is ambivalent as she has to maintain the peace between her husband and her nephew. Matrimonial ties were initially contracted in order to gather families together in a society of dispersed settlements, thus the feuding process is often connected to family affairs, as in some other European societies, such as the Montenegro of Christopher H. Boehm⁵⁹. His notion of “blood-feud” reaches another dimension when the family ties are at stake, as in most of the sagas. The second intervention of Steinunn, in the same chapter, makes this problem clear. Following the retreat of the attacking forces of Sæmundur, Svartur, a man of Ögmundur, proposes to chase them and extend the fight, yet Steinunn assesses the risk of such a venture: “But Steinunn dissuaded them for pursuit, saying she had both her husband and her nephews to try to save and adding that evil alone would come of all this rushing to arms”⁶⁰. She carries the function of peace-keeper within this family blood-feud, and her ambivalent position in regards to both parties assures that she becomes as involved in this feud as the abbot Brandur. The search for conciliation is only possible with a limitation of violence and restraint of any escalation of the conflict. As mediators, Steinunn and Brandur are striving to keep up with this. William Ian Miller explains that, in the case of a feud between the husband and the nephews of the wife, it was acknowledged that each party should respect her by restraining any acts of violence in order to resolve the feud — at least as long as she is alive⁶¹. As in the sagas of the Icelanders, women of this saga take part in the feuding game, but it should be remarked that their function in this saga is limited to mediation, contrary to other sagas in which women often encourage the men to commit acts of violence. In a discussion on the function of women in the feuding game, William Ian Miller writes: “The conventional woman of the saga is strong-willed and uncompromising. She is the self-appointed guardian of the honour of her men and as such she generally sees honor as unnuanced heroism”⁶². Although this generalization can be thought to correspond to the sagas of Icelanders,

⁵⁸ *Sts* II, ch. 363, p. 554.

⁵⁹ C.H. Boehm: *Blood Revenge: The Anthropology of Feuding in Montenegro and Other Non-literate Societies*. Lawrence 1984.

⁶⁰ *Sts* II, ch. 363, p. 556.

⁶¹ In this case W.I. Miller: *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking...*, p. 164 quotes this saga.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 212. Lately, J.L. Byock: *Defining Feud*, pp. 100—110, tried to define the function of women in the feuding system. His study focuses mostly on women in *The Saga of Burnt-Njall*, *The Saga of the People of Weapon’s Fjord* and *The Saga of Thorgils Skardi*.

the same cannot be said of the function of women in the *Saga of the Men of Svinafell*⁶³.

If one could establish a scale of value as relevant to these three mediators, Steinunn would be highest. Indeed, when he plunders the farm of Kirkjubær, Sæmundur's men accuse him of letting Steinunn have a free hand during the court of confiscation: "Steinunn was allowed to keep all the property which was hers by dowry and also that which Ögmundur had given her. Sæmundur claimed to have complete confidence in her assessment, but his followers were very opposed to his relinquishing so much property. He said it was no business of theirs"⁶⁴. Sæmundur, out of respect for his aunt, does not face facts nor listen to the reprimands of his men. In this way, Steinunn manages to save enough property to allow her husband to continue the feud against the brothers. Ögmundur accepts the humiliation of the court of confiscation and sporadically disappears from the local businesses of the Síða, saving face in regards to his spouse. It is only with the death of Steinunn that Ögmundur secretly instigates his vengeance against the brothers, though the saga does not explicitly mention his fateful plan⁶⁵. The bloody resolution of this feud is only possible after the disappearance of Steinunn from the field of action.

The social relationships which follow this conflict can only be resolved in a fatal way. Once the crimes have been accomplished, society must again learn to function normally. The last chapter presents a detailed picture of the resolution of the conflict (see Table 3)⁶⁶. The feud does not end with the death of the leaders of one party, but at the informal trial of the opposing party. Brandur puts the finishing touches to the conflict: first of all, he confiscates the source of Ögmundur's power, the *staðir* of Kirkjubær, which he then hands over to the priest Árnorr skull. Brandur uproots Ögmundur from his estate and exiles him to the desolated land of Dalur. His murders are fined at 80 cents each; the mutilation of Svartur is fined at 30 cents. It is important to notice that, as a leader of the group, he is the only one who must pay a fine for the crimes. Brandur then punishes the main actors of the conflict by imposed exile. Some of them go to Norway; others follow the exile of their leader, in Dalur. The moral dimension of the saga is clear in this chapter, as some of the condemned die of extraordinary causes following their punishment (for example, shipwreck and gangrene). The apparent flexibility of Brandur's final judgement towards Ögmundur and his men can be explained by the fact that the region had suf-

⁶³ J. Louis-Jensen: *Udsigten fra det kvinelige univers — à propos de la Svinfellinga saga*. In: *38 vöplur bakaðar: bakaðar og bornar fram Guðrúnu Ingólfsdóttur fimmtugri 1 maí 2009*. Eds. G.M. Gunnlaugsson, M. Eggertsdóttir, Þ. Sigurðardóttir. Reykjavík 2009, pp. 44—47.

⁶⁴ *Sts* II, ch. 365, p. 558.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, ch. 366, p. 560.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, ch. 371, p. 566.

Table 3

Resolution of the trial of Ögmundur and his followers

Guilty party	Crime	Punishment	Fine
Ögmundur Helgason	in charge of the opponent party culprit of the resolution of the conflict	lost of the staðir of Kirkjubær exiled to Dalur, a no-man's land humdrum life	80 cents for the killing of the sons of Ormur Jónsson 30 cents for the mutilation of Svartur
Jón karl Ögmundarson	son of Ögmundur, faithful to his father in the conflict failed assault against Helgi Loftsson	pilgrimage to Norway exile of three years (dies of gangrene)	none
Þorsteinn hrakauga	follower of Ögmundur executioner of Guðmundur	to go to Norway exile	none
Árni gullskeggur	follower of Ögmundur executioner of Sæmundur and of Svartur	exile (dies during a shipwreck)	none
Snorri sveimur	follower of Ögmundur	Shares the exile of Ögmundur	none
Egill skyrhnakkur	follower of Ögmundur failed assault against Helgi Loftsson	Shares the exile of Ögmundur	none

ferred enough from the conflict and the time had come for the arbitrator to re-establish the peaceful situation present at the beginning of the saga. Brandur has a whit of sense in that he does not inflict a harsher punishment on the men of Ögmundur, who are all members of the local elite and thus important for the continued sequence of everyday life. The conflict forces the whole community to redefine itself according to the two parties and to the choice of alliances. In this society there is no effective and centralized mean to limit the tensions. When the law is not enough, the people have recourse to the mediators in the peace-making process: *Consuetudo est jus quodam moribus institutum, quod pro lege usurpatur ubi deficit lex.*

Concluding remarks

One can be given to wonder if the analysis of conflict in the *Saga of the Men of Svínafell* can be generalized to include the rest of Iceland. Feuds follow well-established codes within this society, with no central power. The balance of power lies with a powerful elite struggling to impose their hegemony and be legitimately recognized by the rest of the elite. As for medieval France, the situation presented here does not resemble chaos; the process of dispute evolves according to a certain limitation of the violence between the two parties. When considering the assembly system which is well described in the law-codes, this saga demonstrates that it is either utilized by the elite within the feuding game, or inefficient without the role of the third party of the mediation. The resolution of a conflict is only possible with the help of arbitrators and, in this case, through the peace-making process of the Abbot Brandur. I think that, despite the higher number of participants, the inter-regional wars from this period do not differ to a large extent from the feuding scheme. The fact that the action of the saga is contemporary with the existing rivalry between Þórður Sighvatsson and Gizur Þorvaldsson supports the hypothesis. The place of Þórður Sighvatsson in this saga is edifying, too, and shows that the Eastern Quarter was not so far removed from the rest of the socio-political events of Iceland. He establishes an alliance with Sæmundur Ormsson and becomes involved in the process of dispute. Thus, I believe that the assertion of Jón Viðar Sigurðsson in regards to the Svínfellingar is not quite right: “The Svínfellingar were the weakest factor of power in this period, and it is doubtful whether they would have survived the power struggles if their domain had not been so isolated”⁶⁷. Rather, the text shows that the local elite knew the importance of the feuding game in the balance of power. Thus the *Saga of the Men of Svínafell* still holds a lot of information for the historian.

⁶⁷ J.V. Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power...*, p. 113.

Grégory Cattaneo

Polityczna równowaga sił we wschodniej Islandii
Uwagi na temat *Sagi o ludziach ze Svinafell*

Streszczenie

Pod koniec XII wieku Islandia była areną istotnych przemian politycznych. Dominujący dotychczas system władzy, opartej na kompetencjach Althingu oraz autorytecie lokalnych wodzów (*goðar*), załamywał się. Równowaga sił na wyspie miała od teraz opierać się na współegzystencji większych domen (*héraðsríkja*) tworzonych przez najbardziej wpływowe rody, kosztem innych lokalnych wodzów. Pod koniec pierwszej połowy XIII wieku, w tzw. epoce Sturlungów, Islandia była nieformalnie podzielona na sześć lokalnych sfer wpływów rządzonych przez znakomite rody: Haukdælir w Árnesþing, Oddaverjar w Rangárþing, Ásbirningar w Skagafjörður, Vatnsfirðingar w Ísafjörður, w Sturlungar w Hvammur w Dalir i Svínfellingar w Austfirðir.

Proces konsolidacji władzy na wyspie charakteryzował się ciągłymi konfliktami między poszczególnymi rodami. Ich przebieg znalazł swoje odbicie w tzw. sagach współczesnych, spisanych na zlecenie głównych i najbardziej wpływowych uczestników walki o władzę (np. *Saga o Sturlungach*). Celem artykułu jest zastanowienie się, w jaki sposób rywalizacja, zmiana sojuszy, zbrojne konfrontacje, w końcu zawierane rozejmy i ugody, wpływały na polityczną równowagę sił we wschodniej Islandii. Podstawą do śledzenia tych mechanizmów jest analiza jednej z sag współczesnych, *Sagi o ludziach ze Svinafell* (*Svínfellinga saga*), w konfrontacji z innymi, głównie rocznikarskimi, przekazami tworzonymi wówczas na wyspie.

Grégory Cattaneo

Politisches Gleichgewicht der Kräfte in Ostisland
Die Bemerkungen zur Sage über die Menschen von Svinafell

Zusammenfassung

Ende des 12. Jahrhunderts war Island die Bühne der wichtigen politischen Umwandlungen. Das bisher geltende und auf die Kompetenzen des Parlaments-Althings und auf der Autorität von lokalen Häuptlingen (*goðar*) gegründete Machtsystem brach zusammen. Das Gleichgewicht der Kräfte sollte von jetzt an auf der Koexistenz von den, durch bedeutendste Stämme zum Kosten der anderen lokalen Häuptlinge gebildeten größeren Domänen (*héraðsríkja*) beruhen. Ende der ersten Hälfte des 13. Jahrhunderts, in der sog. Sturlungenzeit, war Island inoffiziell in sechs Einflusszonen geteilt, die von folgenden berühmten Familien verwaltet wurden: Haukdælir von Árnesþing, Oddaverjar von Rangárþing, Ásbirningar von Skagafjörður, Vatnsfirðingar von Ísafjörður, Sturlungar von Hvammur und Dalir u. Svínfellingar von Austfirðir.

Die Macht auf der Insel wurde in Folge ständiger Konflikte zwischen den einzelnen Familien gefestigt, was seine Widerspiegelung in den sog. zeitgenössischen Sagen gefunden hat, deren Niederlegung übrigens von den bedeutendsten und einflussreichsten Konfliktparteien

beauftragt wurden (z.B.: *Die Sage über Sturlungen*). Im vorliegenden Artikel überlegt der Verfasser, inwieweit der Wettstreit, die Bündnisänderung, bewaffnete Konfrontationen und schließlich die geschlossenen Waffenstillstände und Vergleiche das politische Gleichgewicht der Kräfte in Ostisland beeinflusst hatten. Die Grundlage seiner Überlegungen ist die *Sage über die Menschen von Svinafell* (*Svinfellinga saga*), die er den anderen damals auf der Insel entstandenen Quellen, hauptsächlich Annalen, gegenüberstellt.