



Judging Vikings

Ethics and morality in two Icelandic family sagas
Laxdaela saga & Vatnsdaela saga

Alice Spruit
 Utrecht University

Contents

- Introduction.....3
- The sagas of Icelanders.....4
- Method of research.....7
 - Past research on ethics in the family sagas.....10
- The two sagas and Grágás.....18
 - The Laxdaela saga.....18
 - The Vatnsdaela saga.....19
- Narrative technique.....21
- Grágás.....23
- Character analysis.....26
 - Decisions made based upon loyalty towards family.....28
 - Loyalty towards oneself.....44
 - Loyalty towards the community.....54
- Problems and conclusions.....62
- Conclusion.....67
- Bibliography.....69
 - Primary literature.....69
 - Secondary literature.....69

Introduction

Medieval literature is very diverse, but there is one kind of literature that can hardly be compared to any of the others, and that is the literature of the Icelanders. Coming from a field concerned mainly with Arthurian legend, where moral and ethics are heavy topics, it immediately occurred to me that the Icelandic family sagas did not have such a strong moral or ethical message. The characters seemed to behave irrational, even though it was clear that these characters were the heroes of the story. Finding out what kind of ethics these sagas had, and if they even had a moral message seemed like an interesting challenge for this thesis.

To discern these ethics it seemed to be the right way not to look at the religious aspects of the saga, but just by looking at how the people behaved and how they are judged. For this purpose, one needs sagas that have interesting conflicts. One such saga is the *Laxdaela saga*, and to have a bit of a broader spectrum another saga, the *Vatnsdaela saga* will be treated. As the *Laxdaela saga* has many dramatic conflicts, the conflicts in the *Vatnsdaela saga* are smaller and less dramatic. This maybe gives an interesting comparison, and if not, it might give a greater knowledge of the ethics and morals in the family sagas.

First there will be given an overview of what the sagas of Icelanders exactly entail, in the second chapter the method and the discussion that has been going on about ethics in the family sagas will be treated. In the third chapter the primary literature that is used for this research will be discussed and in the fourth chapter the actions of the characters in the sagas will be analysed. The final chapter is the conclusion.

The sagas of Icelanders

The sagas of Icelanders are known in Icelandic as *Íslendingasögur*, also known in English as the ‘family sagas’, which is not the most suitable name, since only a few of them deal with conflicts of families. These sagas are a unique set of stories, focussing on the conflict of chieftains and farmers in Medieval Iceland, with the characters taking occasional trips (or raids) to Norway and the British Isles. There are a few exceptions where the main action does not lie in Iceland, namely the sagas concerning the voyages to the American continent (*Vinland*) and Greenland and *Egils saga*, in which the main character mainly resides in Norway and England.¹ The events are set between the 9th and 11th century, however, the sagas were written down in Iceland between the 13th and the 14th century, the compilers are anonymous.² A lot of the original manuscripts are lost, which is why now from some sagas only very late copies exist from the 16th or 17th century or even later.³ In Iceland, the sagas were copied until as late as the 19th century, which is why we now have such an extensive knowledge of Icelandic saga literature. It is believed that the family sagas stem from an extensive oral tradition; however that was not the only source for the compilers. It is stated, and many scholars have found evidence for this, that the saga writers did not only get their information from the existing oral tradition, but that they were also influenced by other sagas, Latin literature and other literature from Medieval Europe.⁴

The Icelandic family sagas are part of the larger group of Old Norse-Icelandic literature that incorporates a lot more than just these sagas. The Old Norse-Icelandic literature consists of literature like for example Eddic poetry, skaldic poetry, laws, legendary sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), sagas about kings, sagas about saints, Norse romance (*riddarasögur*; translated sagas from chivalric literature of medieval Europe) and sagas of contemporary history. A lot

¹ Vésteinn Ólason, p. 101.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem, p. 115.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 113

of these sagas were also written down in Iceland but a lot of them (except for the sagas about contemporary history) do not focus on Iceland the way the family sagas do. A kind of narrative that also belongs to the genre of the family sagas is the *þáttr* (pl. *þættir*), these are short stories, much shorter than the average saga, but they often deal with the same kinds of conflicts as the sagas do. They are not particular to the family sagas, for the *þættir* also belong with the genres of the sagas of contemporary history and the kings' sagas. These short tales are not included in this research, but they form an important part of the corpus of the sagas of Icelanders.

The family sagas themselves are viewed as a unique kind of literature, even within the group Old Norse-Icelandic literature, as they seem as though they have been written by eyewitnesses. This aspect of the family sagas being like historical accounts gives two problems. The first problem is that on the one hand the family sagas have a strong connection with the reality of the age of the Viking-raids, but on the other hand, one knows that they were written down much later, consequently they must have changed since that time. The cultural background of the compiler must have had an influence on the sagas and, as told before, evidence has been found that the compilers of the sagas were not only inspired by oral tradition. One then gets a mix of the original saga stemming from oral tradition, the cultural background of the compiler and the inspiration he took from other literature to incorporate in the saga. As Vesteinn Ólason states “two different cultural worlds played over the minds of Icelanders after Iceland was Christianized.”⁵ One can try and find the ‘original’ saga from oral tradition behind the written version we have now, but this seems an impossible task when one needs to take into account all those different small influences that played a part in the compilation of the sagas. What one can find out is that some outside influences that took part in the compiling of the sagas are more obvious than others.

The second problem is the different way of looking at the sagas we do nowadays and the audience did back then. Because, what played a part in the sagas being so realistic is that

⁵ Vesteinn Ólason, p. 110.

many of the characters are based on people who used to live in Iceland at the time the sagas were set. When the sagas were written down, people could still relate very well to them as their forefathers sometimes appeared in the sagas. This gives the sagas an outlook of being historical accounts, and most likely the audience at the time believed that the sagas were true accounts of the events. This gives another division within the sagas. On the one hand there are the sagas and how they were perceived to the audience at the time, on the other hand how we see the sagas nowadays: the sagas are historically inspired but they have so many fictional aspects to them, like supernatural creatures and magic, that we can hardly see them as historical accounts. One can say however, that the audience probably viewed the sagas as historical accounts, but to them they functioned also as a form of entertainment.

As stated above, there are just a few of the family sagas that really concern family matters. As such, the family sagas themselves can also be divided into groups; there is a group of sagas that concerns outlaws, a group that concerns with the voyages to Greenland and *Vinland*, a group about poets and warriors, one about champions, a group about wealth and power and a group that concerns regional feuds.⁶ This division is taken from the division Robert Kellogg makes in the introduction to *The Sagas of Icelanders*. The sagas that will be discussed here, the *Laxdaela saga* and the *Vatnsdaela saga*, concern regional feuds.

⁶ Kellogg, p. lx.

Method of research

The prime objective of this thesis is to bring to light the ethics of the characters of two Icelandic family sagas, the *Laxdaela saga* and the *Vatnsdaela saga*. The reason to treat these two sagas and not others is because when I started reading for this thesis it occurred to me that the *Laxdaela saga* had extremely interesting conflicts, where it was at times hard to follow why characters acted the way they did. Since I thought it to be interesting to involve another saga, but did not want it to be as long as the *Laxdaela saga*, *Vatnsdaela saga* seemed a good choice. This saga is quite different from *Laxdaela saga* and that seemed a nice contrast for the research of ethics in the family sagas.

In Arthurian literature and other literature from medieval Europe (Iceland excluded) there is often a very moralistic message to the story. Often, the characters act in a way that is perceived to be the ‘right’ way, the right way of being a good Christian, husband, or wife. When such a character acts not according to the moral standards of society, it is clearly stated in the stories that this person is acting wrongly. Either this is told by other characters in the story or it is told by the narrator. A good example for this is Lancelot, who will never be the ‘good knight’ because he is in love with King Arthur’s wife, and that alone makes him a morally wrong character.⁷ This moral/ethical aspect is something that is so obvious in these stories of medieval Europe, that it is almost strange when one reads a story where this aspect can not be found that easily. When reading the Icelandic family sagas for the first time, one can not help but notice that these moralistic messages, the ethical way of acting, seem to be almost completely absent from the Icelandic family sagas. As Ándersson states about the family sagas “it has nothing in common with the idealistic, didactic, satirical, or sentimental traditions which flourished during the Middle Ages and after. In short, there is no guiding principle laid down by the author in order to give his material a specific import.”⁸

⁷ For example in the *Conte del Graal* and Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*.

⁸ Ándersson, p. 32.

The characters in the family sagas act in ways that are hard to understand, which has the result that one follows the main characters with mixed feelings, because their actions often seem erratic. When one reads about a character that is acting according to ethical standards it is much easier to get emotionally involved with such a character. When this is not the case, one needs to look closely at the actions of the character and ask oneself what the reasons are behind the person's actions, then one can understand his, or her, ethics. To bring ethics that are so well hidden into the foreground, one must know what ethics and a moral precisely entail. M.C. van den Toorn in his book *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature* has defined this rather well "by Ethics we shall understand (1) the delimitation of the conceptions of good and evil, and (2) the application of these standards in daily life."⁹

To understand what good and evil is in a society whose literature shows a lack of distinction between the two, one must look at how the actions of the characters are judged by the other characters and the narrator. This gives an understanding as to how the community perceived what good and evil was, what their ethical nature entailed. The problem with ethical conduct is that sometimes characters are judged but they do not act accordingly to how they are judged. They seem to follow their own path. This path can be one of selfishness and greed, and then there are no ethics behind the persons' actions, for they act unethical. Sometimes, however, they do act according to their own ethical reasoning, when for example the characters feel they need to stand up for themselves, because their feelings have been hurt. Here, the line between revenge and no ethical conduct on the one hand and justice and ethical conduct on the other hand is very thin. To define whether a character acts out of revenge or out of hurt feelings which need to be justified is up to the reader and any characters that express their judgement to decide, but the problem with these kinds of actions is that often there are no other characters around to give the judgment. This problem needs to be handled with care and when such a dilemma arises, one has to define precisely what is an action taken out of ethical reasoning and what is not.

⁹ Van den Toorn, p. 1.

For the term ‘moral’ Van den Toorn has a separate definition, “the clearly recognisable intention which an author incorporates in his work in order to edify his readers or hearers.”¹⁰ The moral will be the underlying message of the saga, if any can be found and this will be assumed to be the work of the narrator. Since the Icelandic family sagas were written down much later than they were set, a division is created when one speaks of the characters on the one hand and the ‘author’ on the other hand. But in this research there will not be put any focus on that, because it seems far more logical to look at the saga we have at hand, and not at what is hidden behind several layers of copyist work and a long tradition of oral tradition with influences from other literary works. Therefore, there will be no division of the characters and the ‘old’ saga on the one hand and the narrator and the ‘new’/‘adapted’ saga on the other hand.

These sagas are a completed piece of literature as they have come down to us. What will be taken from Van den Toorn’s definitions is that there will be looked at the characters actions closely “the application of the standards in daily life”¹¹, how do they act, why do they act like that and what does that tell us about where their loyalty lies? According to where their loyalties lie, and what they thus perceive as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ to themselves, their ethical nature will be brought to the light. It would be interesting to see if there is an underlying moral message, because there is a basis in reality, to the family sagas. But, since the family sagas had been oral literature for quite some time the ‘original’ story of course has changed so far that now, we, the modern researcher, can see the many fictive elements in the sagas. The family sagas therefore, are probably not a complete accurate representation of real life in Medieval Iceland. But, the conflicts in the sagas are probably quite representative as to what kind of conflicts occurred in medieval Iceland. Therefore, the actions people take will be compared to the laws of medieval Iceland, *Grágás*. By comparing people’s actions to *Grágás*, the characters’ ethical reasoning can be more easily traced. But, laws are not always followed that closely in real life, which is something that will be seen in the sagas discussed here. But

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Van den Toorn, p. 1.

one must keep in mind here that it is not about laying the focus on the characters' actions having a basis in reality (*Grágás*), but to help deduce what kind of ethics are behind the characters' actions in these sagas.

Past research on ethics in the family sagas

When starting this research, it was apparent that already quite some research had been done on the subject of ethics in the family sagas. An overview of that discussion will be given here, as the information from this research was important to this thesis.

One of the first books written about the ethics in the family sagas is *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature* by M.G. van den Toorn. In this book Van den Toorn tries to give a thorough investigation into the ethics of the Icelandic Family Sagas. Van den Toorn tries to take into account that the sagas were written down much later than when they were set. He observes different layers of ethics in the sagas, each of them of equal importance to his research. The different layers of ethics he distinguishes are heathen ethics, Christian ethics and heroic ethics. The heathen ethics he tries to bring forward by looking at a poem in the *Elder Edda*, the *Hávamál*. This poem touches several ethical subjects that he uses in his research to compare to the ethics of the characters in the family sagas. He had some problems with the *Hávamál*, because it is a very difficult poem. This poem brings forward the ethics of Old Norse culture, but as a poem it lacks unity according to Van den Toorn. While the poem touches many different subjects, there are only a few of these subjects he needs for his research. Van den Toorn states that the *Hávamál* was most useful to him, because it was not influenced by Christianity, therefore he could make a clear distinction between heathen ethics and Christian ethics in the family sagas using this poem.¹² He states that the heathen ethics were never the most prominent part of the sagas because soon Christianity had an important

¹² Van den Toorn, p. 24.

influence on Icelandic culture as well.¹³ Still, the heathen ethics always had been an important part of Scandinavian culture, therefore they needed to be investigated.¹⁴ When finding the Christian ethics in the Family sagas, he looks for what is supposed to be Christian behaviour, like self humiliation, or when the new faith is glorified, also when a character seems to act without any self interest this comes from Christian ethics according to Van den Toorn. For the heroic ethics he looked for things that were supposed to be heroic. Everything that has to do with bravery and heroic conduct, he puts under 'heroic ethics'. He finds heroic actions by looking at what people say about the actions of other people. When persons are called 'brave', he concludes that the action taken by the character must have been one that comes from heroic ethics. He also looks at the heroic poetry from the *Elder Edda* and compares it to the family sagas, to see if they are alike. Things that he considers to belong to the heroic ethics are when one has self control in pain and sorrow, or when people let fate take its course, but also self respect, hospitality and friendship are headed under 'heroic ethics'. Other things that he also puts with heroic ethics are the family ties that are extremely strong and which stimulate heroic and honest emotions.¹⁵ Another heroic aspect is 'the love for glory', all these aspects that appear often in the family sagas, van den Toorn heads under heroic ethics.

In his conclusion, he tries to be a bit more subtle and defend the three different kinds of ethics he has made. He states that one still needs to be careful not to make a too sharp distinction between these three kinds of ethics, because these three different codes were all written down in the same period. Then it is for example hard to distinguish if some of the ethics he headed under 'Hávamál ethics' might maybe have been older than he thinks them to be. He also states that the ethics that have to do with family might be very difficult to put in one category, since they sometimes fall under more than one. He also states that it is hard to distinguish whether ethics were added when the saga was written down, or whether these ethics were already part of the saga. Here in his conclusion, Van den Toorn uses the word

¹³ Van den Toorn, p. 12.

¹⁴ Van den Toorn, p. 7.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 108.

‘strata’ to define the different categories of ethics. With this he wants to imply that they can appear side by side and intermingle. His overall conclusion is that the ethics in the sagas are not easily to be distinguished into different groups, but by making these different ‘strata’s one can put the three kinds of ethics next to each other and the different aspects of Icelandic culture come forward in that way. But the sagas themselves could be placed in different groups according to their general ethics. So some sagas have stronger heroic ethics and others have stronger Christian ethics but one needs, when researching ethics of the sagas, to stick with one saga at a time, because it is too general to bring all the sagas under one kind of ethics.

This research by Van den Toorn was quite useful when it came to how I did not want my research to do. The idea of pulling apart the sagas like he does, seemed too strict. Even though Van den Toorn states that one needs to keep in mind that the different ethical ‘stratas’ can exist next to each other and can overlap each other, by doing this he did not seem to view the sagas as they have come down to us as a complete piece of literature. Of course, the sagas are coming from an oral tradition, but what we have now, is that what was written down in the 13th century. That does not mean that those heathen and heroic aspects do not exist in the sagas, but the sagas have been told and retold and rewritten so many times, that those heroic, Christian and heathen ethics might have been influenced to a point that one can not specifically say which belongs to which. I therefore opted to not take the same approach as Van den Toorn. His definitions of ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’ were however very useful, as one can read in the section about the method used for this thesis.

Another book that concerns ethics in the family sagas is the book *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-century Iceland* by Guðrún Nordal. In this book, Nordal is more looking at the sagas of contemporary history; the *Íslendinga saga*, than at the family sagas, but a part of her research also concerns the family sagas. She compares the family sagas to the contemporary *Íslendinga saga* with which she hopes to deduce from that the two kinds of sagas differ from

each other in ethical matter. She also uses the laws, but she is hesitant to use them as a proof for how people behaved in the thirteenth century, she will only use it as: “the legal evidence, important as it is, will only be included as an indicative of ideal behaviour”.¹⁶

The *Íslendinga saga* is part of the *Sturlunga saga* compilation, so it did not survive in its original version. The *Sturlunga saga* is a compilation of nine individual works which were adapted to fit the purpose of the compilation.¹⁷ The *Sturlunga saga* was created around 1300 and the *Íslendinga saga* was written around the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁸ For her research, she uses the *Sturlunga saga* in general and the *Íslendinga saga* specific to make her point. In her research, Nordal tries to bring out the historical aspect in the ethics of the sagas she discusses, since the contemporary sagas were written down when they were composed, while the family sagas are less historical, because they were written down much later than that they were set. Her research is extensive; she treats family loyalties, sexual morality, motivations and personal conscience. Of each of these topics she treats several sub-topics, under ‘family loyalties’ she treats the relations between the different family members; father and son, brothers and uncle and nephew. In her research she draws a comparison with the family sagas and it becomes clear to her that the family sagas and the contemporary sagas should not be treated in the same way, because the contemporary sagas have clear historical references, while the family sagas have not according to Nordal. But in her research she draws a comparison between the kinship structures of the family sagas and the contemporary sagas, since that is something that has not changed. In this way, Nordal draws on the family sagas as a literary source. She looks back on the family sagas for practical issues like family ties, and then she can compare the two sagas, *Sturlunga saga* and *Íslendinga saga* with the family sagas and how different or alike they are in certain aspects. She notices that for example when someone is killed in the *Sturlunga saga* and only the killer and the victim are present, the aspect of reality disappears, since the author could not have witnessed it, nor anyone else,

¹⁶ Guðrún Nordal, p. 28.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 11.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

therefore the killing is then only of literary design.¹⁹ In the family sagas such a killing can not necessarily be used as a literary design, since the family sagas' connection to reality is much weaker than in the Sturlunga saga. With this research she tries to paint a diverse picture of moral behaviour in thirteenth-century Iceland, based on not just literature, but literature with a basis in history. In her epilogue she states that it was her goal to "bring to light the distinct and uncompromising evidence of Sturla's unique representation of Icelandic thirteenth-century society."²⁰

Nordal's approach appealed to me, she looks very closely to the things that happen in the sagas, the only thing that was obviously different, is that she focused on the historical aspect, while that is not the case for this research. Similarities between Nordal's research and this research, is that she also uses *Grágás* when looking at family related matters, but she does not link *Grágás* to the motivations of the characters. The motivations of the characters have a separate chapter that concerns not so much loyalty towards family or community or oneself, but more in a broader sense, like 'theft and robbery', 'the seizing of food', 'loyalty to a host'. She also has a chapter called 'personal conscience', a chapter that is similar to the chapter in this thesis about staying loyal to oneself. Still, her research has been valuable, because her approach and the approach in this thesis have overlapping aspects.

An article that was quite useful is the article by Hermann Pálsson 'Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics'. In this article he begins by stating how important the influences of myths and heroic legends are to the family sagas and that they play an important part to the ethics of the family sagas. He draws a comparison between the family sagas and Irish medieval literature, as both contain this heroic aspect. The medieval literature from Ireland, however, much stronger than the family sagas. It is this heroic aspect that gives the family sagas their timeless nature, that both then and now people can enjoy the sagas of Icelanders. Even though he states that this heroic aspect is an important part of the sagas, he thinks that one should not

¹⁹ Guðrun Nordal, p. 227.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 220.

focus just on these heroic ethics. Pálsson states that “the modern proponent of the pagan theory seems to base his ethical analysis of the sagas on the assumption that their ideology must be pagan; then he sets out in search of suitable passages in the sagas to support his thesis, and finally he interprets the entire artifact, except when he stumbles on explicitly Christian elements, in the light of a pagan system of values which is ultimately derived from the sagas themselves. The whole argument is a vicious circle.”²¹

He then goes on by explaining that when focusses so closely on the heroic ideal, the researcher tends to think that the reader has to agree with everything the hero of the saga does. While he thinks one should look at the actions of the characters and not just agree with everything just because they are the hero of the saga. He states: “There is a strong tendency in nativistic criticism to approach the problem of saga ethics in terms of *agents*, rather than *actions*. The learned medieval mind was more analytical and it saw men not as good or evil in themselves but as a sum of intentions and actions, a synthesis of many elements both good and bad.”²² This is a very good point, as it shows why it is so difficult to find ethics and morality in the Icelandic family sagas, since there was no one kind of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Exceptions that were often perceived as wholly bad were characters like bullies, or people who excersiced magic. Looking at the characters’ actions then gives a better impression as to why people act in certain ways. This is crucial to this thesis as it will be shown by looking at people’s actions, what their ethics are.

Pálsson then goes on to see how violence was perceived in the Middle Ages, by using the Bible and the *Elucidarius*, and he points out that the intention of a killing determined the moral nature of the act, instead of the act itself.²³ He elaborates about how topics like fate, luck, duty and free will have an important part in understanding the ethics of the sagas. He also thinks that one should look at the sagas as literature and that one can learn a lot about the ethics of the sagas when one looks for words that have to do with ethics and morality. He

²¹ Hermann Pálsson, p. 64.

²² Ibidem, p. 65.

²³ Ibidem, p. 66.

therefore suggests that one always needs to look at the sagas first in its literal sense, one must look at the literary construct as a whole. He does not want to exclude the historical and cultural aspects, but since the sagas are first a piece of literature, Pálsson argues that they must be treated as such in the first place. He concludes his article by asking whether the family sagas can be described as manifestations of medieval humanism.²⁴

Pálsson points out with this article how important it is to focus on the action of the characters in the sagas to determine their ethics. That part of his article was obviously useful for this thesis. However, there are many things that he points out that did not seem useful to this thesis. For example, heroic ethic is something that does not have a place in this thesis, as it seemed to me that then there is a tendency to divide the saga into different layers of ethics as Van den Toorn did. Of course, both heroic aspects, Christian aspects and pagan aspects are important to understand Icelandic culture in general, but by looking at the actions of the characters mainly, I tried to avoid dividing Icelandic culture, but to take it as a whole, as it had come down to us.

Two works I could not get a hold of, but which probably were interesting for this thesis were Hermann Pálsson's book *Art and ethics in Hrafnkel's saga* and *The ethics of survival: a critical approach to the Icelandic family saga* by M.V. Evans. Pálsson's book could have been useful as to get another insight into how ethics were found in another family saga. I did find a review of the book, and it seemed that the book was also, besides ethics, concerned with the esthetic side of the saga. As this is something that was not useful for this thesis, it probably was not vital to get a hold of the book, however it could have been an interesting addition. The dissertation by M.V. Evans was also very hard to obtain, as the only copy of this work could be found at the Queen's University in Canada. There was a small abstract in the Dissertations International, but that did not give any clue as to what the contents of the dissertation exactly were. These two books about ethics in family sagas might have been interesting to include in this thesis, but due to circumstances they could not be

²⁴ Hermann Pálsson, p. 75.

obtained.

A book that seemed interesting at first, but turned out to be of no use for this research was: *Chaos and love: the philosophy of the Icelandic family sagas* by Thomas Bredsdorff. In this book, Bredsdorff states that most actions of the characters in the family sagas are driven by passion and lust. This was something I did not think was interesting or relevant for my research.

The two sagas and Grágás

The Laxdaela saga

This saga is set around 890-1030, but was written down around 1250-70. There are many manuscripts left of this saga, but there is only one intact vellum manuscript, the version from *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol., dated 1330-70) upon which all printed versions are based.²⁵ It is assumed from the family sagas that they stem from an oral tradition since they were written down much later than that they were set. However, Margaret A. Madelung in her book *The Laxdaela Saga*, argues that the *Laxdaela saga* is a composition of various written works.²⁶ However, she does state that the main characters were historical figures and that certain facts were based on reality as well, as they can be found in other manuscripts about Iceland's history.²⁷ She states how the compiler of the saga probably wanted it to look like an historical work as he did not want to be a liar about what he told.²⁸ For the purpose here, it is not that relevant whether the saga stems from an oral tradition or whether it came from both an oral tradition and a composition of several written work. Here, it is not necessary to go back to the origins of the saga but rather stay with the saga as it has come down to us from the thirteenth century manuscript.

The original text used here is from the version printed in *Íslenzk fornrit* vol. 5 and the used translation for this analysis is from the book *The Sagas of Icelanders*, the translation is from *Íslenzk fornrit* vol. 5, and a few variant readings are used from Kristian Kålund's critical edition.²⁹ The saga is about several generations of families and more so, it is about one woman, called Gudrun, and her many marriages. The saga starts with telling about Ketil Flatnose, a man who did not want to stay in Norway under the rule of King Harald and

²⁵ Örnólfur Thorsson, p. 275.

²⁶ Madelung, p. 154.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 148.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 149.

²⁹ Örnólfur Thorsson, p. 275.

therefore decided to leave the country. With his daughter Unn he sailed to the west and went to Scotland. In Scotland, Ketil and his grandson, Unn's son, were both killed. Unn decided to leave Scotland and via the Orkneys and the Faroe Islands she went to Iceland, with her she brought all of her kinsmen. There she settles with her family in the western part of Iceland. She gives the husband of her granddaughter, Thorgerd, all of the Salmon River valley, Laxárdal. The saga then goes on to tell about Hoskuld, Thorgerd's son and how he fares when his half brother comes from Norway to claim his inheritance. The story then shifts, from Unn's family, to the family of a man called Osvif son of Helgi. His daughter Gudrun plays a very important part in the *Laxdaela saga*. Gudrun marries four times. Sometimes she gets a divorce, other times her husband gets killed. At one instance in the saga Gudrun is linked to a descendant of Unn, she falls in love with Unn's great-grandson Kjartan. The problem is that Kjartan leaves for Norway for three years and he does not want Gudrun to come with him and she does not want to wait for him. When the three years have passed, she marries Bolli, Kjartan's best friend and foster-brother, as she understood from Bolli, Kjartan was probably not coming back. This marriage results in a big conflict between Kjartan on the one hand and Bolli on the other hand. The saga ends when all deaths are avenged and Gudrun has died. This is a rough summary of the saga, of course a lot more happens in this saga, but what is an interesting aspect is that strong women play an important part. Many articles have been written about this aspect of the saga and some say that the *Laxdaela saga* has maybe been written by a woman, but this has never been known to be certain.³⁰

The Vatnsdaela saga

This saga is set around 875-1000 and was written down around 1270-1320. There are no early manuscripts left, only later ones, the earliest vellum fragment is dated 1390-1425 (AM 445 b

³⁰ Örnólfur Thorsson, p. 275.

4to).³¹ This saga is believed to come from an oral tradition, but we stick with the saga as it survived until this day. The original text used here is from the text in *Íslenzk fornrit*, vol. 8, the translation is a translation from the text in *Íslenzk fornrit*, by Andrew Wawn.³² The story of the *Vatnsdaela saga* is not much like the *Laxdaela saga*, of course it is also about a family in Iceland and this saga also starts in Norway, as many of the family sagas do. The saga starts with the story of a chieftain, whose son Thorstein goes into the woods to fight a highway robber. He marries the highway robber's sister and their son, Ingimund, moves to Iceland with his family in the fourteenth chapter. He settles in a valley of the river Vatnsdal as was prophesized by Lapp people earlier in the saga. One day he meets a Norwegian who carries a beautiful sword, Ingimund has his mind set on the sword and by a cunning plan he gets the sword. The saga then moves on to the sons of Ingimund and their actions. When one day Ingimund dies, his eldest son Thorstein becomes the leader of the family. The saga keeps focusing on Thorstein and his brothers and the feuds they have with people around them. They are not always big feuds, mostly smaller ones that do not extend for that many chapters and when one day Thorstein dies, Ingolf his son takes over the leadership. When Ingolf dies, due to a wound from a fight, the story then again shifts to one of the other family members, Thorkel the great grandson of Ingimund, a nephew of Ingolf. The story ends with the death of Thorkel, who dies from an illness, it is said at the end of the saga that Thorkel surpassed his predecessors Thorstein and Ingimund, because he was a man of God. This saga has a lot of supernatural elements in it, a lot of magic and there is less focus on the women, when compared to the *Laxdaela Saga*. It is believed by some scholars, that this saga was written in a monastery, because this saga is considered to be the most Christian saga out of the family sagas.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Ibidem.

Narrative technique

The *Sagas of Icelanders* were written down anonymously, and as said before, the way the sagas are told is as if one reads an eye-witness' report. The sagas seem like a historical account because the narrator is very objective; he hardly judges and gives very little detail about the characters' feelings. He seems to write down the events as he saw them happening in front of him, as if he heard the people talk himself. But he is never involved in the events that happen, he always talks in the third person. He shows the events often from the perspective of a single character, but during the saga this perspective of course changes from character to character and the narrator always stays objective, unless a person has behaved so badly, then the narrator judges this person, although one has to look closely to notice this. The narrator is thus a hardly noticeable presence, as Arnold R. Taylor in his article 'Laxdaela saga and author involvement in the Icelandic Sagas' states when the narrator retracts himself from involvement in the sagas he is "bound to abrogate the necessity for judgment and moral comment upon his characters, but equally he is bound to hand over the responsibility for judgment, both moral and aesthetic, to his audience."³³ The sagas being a part of an extensive oral tradition, even though the *Laxdaela saga* has quite some influences from written works, could be connected to the narrator being so objective. Since the stories are based on historical characters and events, it can be assumed that the audience already had quite some knowledge about the sagas' content and thus the narrator as well. The narrator then, because there was already so much known about the sagas, maybe needed to stay objective, because that was the way the saga was known and there was no need to influence it in any way. That the audience already had foreknowledge about the sagas can be clearly seen in for example the *Vatnsdaela saga* when a new character comes to the story who behaves strange; a few chapters later it becomes clear that this person was known to be obnoxious, the audience therefore must have known that this person was like this from the first moment he entered the saga, to understand

³³ Taylor, p. 15.

the situation correctly. These kinds of aspects like dreams occur in many of the sagas and it was noticed that themes like conflict and revenge occurred in many of the sagas as well. It has therefore been attempted to find a common narrative structure for all the family sagas.

The scholar who looked for structural patterns that occurred in all of the sagas was Theodore M. Ándersson with his book *The Icelandic Family Sagas: an Analytical Reading*. He divides the sagas into five parts; there is an introduction, conflict, climax, revenge, reconciliation and finally an aftermath. However, this pattern is sometimes too general as it happens that it sometimes occurs more than once in a single saga, or the pattern does not occur at all. It is an interesting division to look at the sagas in general, but when one looks closer at the sagas, one can see that this structural pattern does not always apply that easy. The problem with this division as well is that scholars often disagree as to what the main climax of the saga is.

When one looks at the two sagas discussed here separately, the *Vatnsdaela saga* does not dwell long on incidents, they happen and then the focus goes over to how quiet and well everything goes, before the next incident happens. The narrator is especially present when things happen that ‘now’ are no longer the custom, as opposed to when for example heathen customs were still in regular use. This can be clearly seen at the end of the *Vatnsdaela saga* when the narrator praises one of the main characters as a man of God as opposed to the other characters: “Thorkel surpassed them in that he was a man of the true faith”³⁴. Where the narrator could be clearly seen as well is when an episode has ended and the saga moves on to a new situation. The narrator then clearly states that a person is either out of the saga, or that a certain situation has ended and that the saga moves on to something else. For example in the *Laxdaela saga* in chapter 30: “One night they ran aground on rocks near Stad, and Geirmund and all aboard were drowned, bringing Geirmund’s story to an end.”³⁵

In general, the narrative technique of the *Laxdaela saga* is not that different from the

³⁴ Wawn, p. 269.

³⁵ Kunz, p.326.

Vatnsdaela saga, but where the narrator is quite distant in the *Vatnsdaela saga*, in the *Laxdaela saga* there is a little bit more involvement, especially the use of dreams shows the narrator's involvement in the structure of the saga. The events happening in the *Laxdaela saga* are told more extensively, which has the result that there is a little bit more insight in the characters' motives. This makes the narrator appear as if he is a bit more in the foreground. But still, in both sagas the narrator is hardly noticeable, only through certain literary devices one can see the narrator's involvement.

Grágás

Grágás is a set of laws, *Grágás* meaning literally 'grey goose'; it is unknown where this name derived from.³⁶ *Grágás* consist out of many codices, fragments and copies, but the main body of *Grágás* is two manuscripts. One of them is called *Konungsbók* and the other *Staðarhólsbók*. The first is named because it was owned for many years by the Danish King and the other is named after the farm where it was found in Iceland. The manuscripts date from the middle of the thirteenth century, but there are earlier vellum fragments that date from around 1150.³⁷ The manuscripts are not identical in content, but basically quite similar, in *Staðarhólsbók* several sections are missing that are present in *Konungsbók*, the latter is therefore more important.³⁸ *Staðarhólsbók*, however, gives a more detailed account of the laws. In this analysis the *Grágás* in the original Old Norse language could not be obtained, therefore a translated edition is used: *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás part I and II*. This edition uses the text from *Konungsbók*, they would have wanted to use both manuscripts but they were unable to do so. But, since *Konungsbók*, is to be preferred over *Staðarhólsbók*, it can be assumed that a representative account of the laws of early Iceland is given here.³⁹ The laws

³⁶ Dennis, p. 9, part I.

³⁷ Byock, p. 309.

³⁸ Dennis, p. 17, part I.

³⁹ Byock, p. 312.

themselves are believed to be dating back to earlier times.⁴⁰ *Grágás* is therefore not a completed set of laws that was a finished product. Rather, one must see *Grágás* as a collection of laws that were all in effect at some time but one must not assume that the laws in *Grágás* were in effect all at the same time. Even though *Grágás* are a set of laws, they were not necessarily obligatory, as Jesse Byock states: “*Grágás* was not a set code that everyone was expected to obey, but a group of rules that individuals could use to their advantage or turn to the disadvantage of others.”⁴¹ This is something that one can see clearly in the sagas discussed here. One part of *Grágás* known as the Christian laws section contains laws connected to the Church, for they are strongly connected to the Christian faith. They treat subjects such as baptism, burial, sorcery and the duties of bishops and priests. The Christian laws were written down around 1122-1133, but they go back to earlier times as well. They were known as the ‘Old Christian Laws’ and they were in effect until the ‘New Christian Laws’ were introduced.⁴² As the Christian laws section contains the laws that are strongly connected to the Christian faith, the other laws thus do not contain this strong Christian aspect. As Christian aspects are present in the sagas discussed here, the Christian law section needed to be consulted at times for the analysis. When the laws were written down, a lot of the old laws were transmitted to the thirteenth century, this is how we know to this day about older laws, which maybe were already out of date at the time of writing. People writing down the laws, copied the old ones, but when a new law was proposed, a majority of the people at the law council (*lögrétta*) needed to be in favour of the new law.

The law council entailed all of Iceland but, society in Medieval Iceland was self-governed and extremely decentralised. There were chieftains, called *goðar* (sing. *goði*) who were the political leaders of a district, the farmers (*thingmenn*, *thingmaðr* sing.) that followed their leadership could count on their chieftains when it came to disputes that needed to be settled. The chieftains had a personal relationship with their followers and when a farmer was

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 309.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 308.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 312.

not content about his chieftain, he could switch to a different *goði* with whom he probably got along better.⁴³ The *goðar* were an elite people, whose title was usually passed on to a family member, but not necessarily a first born son.⁴⁴ Their power very political, since they were able to settle disputes, they needed to be good at politics. It happened often that a *thingmaðr* of one *goði* had a dispute with a *thingmaðr* of another *goði* and then in the end the two *goðar* had to settle the dispute between them in name of their *thingmenn*.⁴⁵ This was how regionally politics were handled, but there was a national assembly in Iceland that stood at the heart of Icelandic government, called the Althing (*alþing*). This was an assembly held annually where all the *goðar* were present. The Althing was not just a political gathering; it was an annual event where a lot of people, not only *goðar*, came together to trade their goods and meet new people. The Althing lasted for two weeks in the southern part of Iceland during the summer. The event that stood at the heart of the Althing was the law council (*lögrétta*) where the chieftains decided about new and old laws. But aside of this national event, there were also smaller assemblies, called *þings*, which were held frequently and were on a smaller scale. The *goðar* were responsible for organising the things in their own region. The most important local assembly was the *várthing* according to Jesse Byock.⁴⁶ This was held every year in the spring and around the middle of the tenth century there were twelve of these assemblies in spring. At this local assembly cases were settled that could not be solved otherwise and debts were paid. In the sagas discussed here, it often occurs that the characters go to a local assembly or an Althing, or they gain the position of chieftain and have to act according to the duties that come with the title.

⁴³ Byock, pp. 126-132.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 126-132.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 171.

Character analysis

In the *Laxdaela saga* and the *Vatnsdaela saga* characters take action according to what they think or feel is right. Sometimes the decisions they make do not seem to make a lot of sense but when one looks more closely at the story and the characters, one can see why certain actions have been taken. These two sagas are not the same, even though they both belong to the genre of the Icelandic Family Sagas and both are grouped under ‘regional feuds’ in *The Sagas of Icelanders*.⁴⁷ This is of course a rough subdivision and does not say anything about the type of feuds in the sagas, or what kind of actions the characters take in these feuds and what ethics lie beneath these actions. What makes it difficult to understand the characters' actions is the absence of any elaborate explanations in the sagas. Where one would find a detailed description of the feelings and motives of characters in an Arthurian story, here mostly actions are described. But when one looks closely at the actions, the motives of the characters can be interpreted. In the *Laxdaela saga* there are several actions taken by characters that have an important influence on the saga. In the *Vatnsdaela saga* this is less the case, still, the things happening in this saga are no less interesting.

In the following analysis the scenes are put into categories based on where the loyalties of the characters lie. When persons are involved in a conflict and have to make a choice what action to take, they need to find out where their loyalties lie. And when they have taken action, they will most likely be judged by the people around them. When they are judged, sometimes the persons decide to change their mind and then their loyalty shifts.

In the literary analysis the first category is based on the loyalty towards family. In Medieval Iceland, family is a very important aspect of life, because often when a person is in trouble, he relies on his family to help him. Medieval Icelandic society was a new society as no one had lived in Iceland before, except for a few monks from the British Isles who left as

⁴⁷ Örnólfur Thorsson, p. lx.

soon as people from Scandinavia started settling there.⁴⁸ Therefore no standard medieval society structure had been established, there was no king, and there were no villages or cities. Medieval Iceland mainly consisted out of big farmer families; there were bigger and smaller farms and the people working on the farms were often the family members themselves. When one relies on family members to get the work done on the farm, a good connection with ones family becomes very important. A good relation with ones family was not only important for work getting done on the farm, but it was also necessary in case one got in trouble, since, when the closest connections one has is with family, one can always rely on them. So when in trouble, they were often the ones to get you out of trouble or at least help you out. When, for example, people are outlawed, they often can still count on the help of their family, even though it was officially forbidden to help an outlaw.⁴⁹

The biggest conflicts in the sagas often concern whether a person should stay loyal to his family or not. When one is in doubt whether to stay loyal to his family or not, the doubt is often between family loyalty and staying loyal to one's own ethics. The second category concerns just this; it is about staying loyal to one's own moral values. What makes this category difficult is that it is sometimes hard to see if a person is strongly clinging to his own ethics or if a person is simply being selfish and has put even his own ethics aside and is thus being unethical. When a conflict is of such an influence that it concerns a whole community, the episode is placed in the third category; staying loyal to one's community. This often concerns situations where one person is a danger to a bigger community, such as a group of families or a district.

The difficulty with the division of the scenes is that some scenes could easily be explained in one of the other categories as well. This often concerns scenes that evolve around more than one character, which makes it harder to put them in one specific category, since these different characters have different loyalties. But, based on what the characters carried

⁴⁸ Byock, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Dennis, p. 97, part I.

out in general, the scenes were put in the corresponding category. This final decision is of course based on the interpretation of a modern reader, but it gives a solid explanation for the arrangement of the episodes.

In the analysis of the different episodes the words ‘maybe’ and ‘probably’ are frequently used because, often, not enough information is given in the saga text to decide what the exact motives of the characters are. As a solution a few additional explanations of the characters’ actions are given.

Decisions made based upon loyalty towards family

In the *Laxdaela saga*, the first significant conflict concerns two-half brothers, this conflict is strongly judged by the people around them.⁵⁰ These two brothers did not grow up together, so they were not able to create a stable bond between them in the way that family members who grow up together, such as both blood related family members and not blood related family members usually do. Foster-brothers, for example, could have as strong a bond as blood related brothers, this is apparent between two foster brothers later on in the saga.⁵¹ Foster-brothers grow up together, but they are not related by blood because they do not have the same father and mother. They are however, both brought up by the parents of one of them, which would make them foster-brothers. The episode discussed here, is about two half-brothers (not foster-brothers) who are related by blood because they have the same mother, but they did not grow up together. One of these two half brothers, Hoskuld, is born in Iceland and the other one, Hrut, in Norway. They grow up far apart and so they do not meet until Hrut comes to Iceland.

The conflict between these two brothers concerns their inheritance. When Hoskuld’s father dies of a disease, his mother Thorgerd does not want to stay in Iceland and moves back

⁵⁰ This episode begins in chapter 7, p. 281 (Kunz), p. 11 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

⁵¹ Bolli and Kjartan.

to Norway where she can be close to her family. When she moves to Norway she brings her possessions with her. In Norway she remarries and she and her second husband get a son named Hrut. When she moved to Norway, Hoskuld took over the care for the farm. After Thorgerd's second husband dies, Thorgerd moves back to live with Hoskuld in Iceland; with her she brings a lot of her possessions. She returns to Iceland where she stays until her death. Half of the possessions she brought back with her belong to Hrut, but since Hrut is still in Norway, Hoskuld now also has Hrut's half of the possessions after their mother's death. When Hrut decides to go abroad, knowing that quite an amount of wealth is waiting for him in Iceland, he goes to Hoskuld to demand his inheritance. Hoskuld opposes his claim, stating that their mother had plenty of belongings when she moved to Norway. With this Hoskuld implies that Hrut already took some of their mother's possessions before she moved back to Iceland. But nowhere in the saga is this directly stated; however, it is told that Hoskuld took all her money when she died, meaning that Hrut now does not have any of their mother's possessions. Hrut persists and at various assemblies, *þings*, he tries to claim his share of the inheritance. He fails in this because Hoskuld states that he, Hoskuld, had not given his consent for his mother's second marriage and since he was legally their mother's guardian he is not obliged to give Hrut his inheritance. Other people at the legal gatherings and assemblies, however, stated that Hrut is right. When Hoskuld goes away to visit a friend, Hrut takes some of Hoskuld's livestock. Hoskuld's men try to fight Hrut and his group of men, but Hrut's group is too strong and Hoskuld's men have to surrender. When Hoskuld hears of this, he wants to take his revenge, but his wife asks him whether this is such a good idea. In the end, the two brothers reconcile.

What makes this conflict interesting is that Hoskuld stands alone in his opinion. His wife thinks he should just give his half brother what is rightly his and she is worried that there will be a bigger conflict otherwise. She refers to friendships Hrut made with people Hoskuld is not on good terms with.

“Því at mér er sagt, at farit muni hafa orðsendingar í hljóð milli þeira Þórðar gellis ok Hrúts; myndi mér slíkir hlutir þykkja ísjáverðir; [...] veiztu ok þat, Høskuldr, síðan er mál þeira Þórðar godda ok Vigdísar urðu, at ekki verðr slík blíða á með ykkur Þórði gelli sem áðr, þóttú kæmir í fyrstu af þér með féggjofum fjándskap þeira frænda; hygg ek ok þat, Høskuldr,” segir hon, “at þeim þykkir þú þar raunmjösitja yfir sinum hlut ok sonr þinn, Ólafr.”⁵²

“I’ve been told that Hrut has secretly exchanged messages with Thord Bellow, which I find very ominous. [...] You know only too well, Hoskuld, that since the split between Thord and Vigdis there’s been no love lost between you and Thord Bellow and his kinsmen, though you managed to lessen their hostility towards you temporarily with gifts. And I think, Hoskuld,” said Jorunn, “that they take offence at the way you and your son Olaf have been denying them their share.”⁵³

She also thinks that a man of Hrut’s stature should not be killed and she tells him that many people think Hrut is right and that he should have taken the livestock from Hoskuld much earlier. His wife is protecting their position in the community as she tries to make sure that there will not be any bigger conflict that might ruin their family. Other people surrounding Hoskuld, neighbours and friends, also urge him to give Hrut what should be his and their argument is the same, that they are half-brothers and that Hrut has the right to own his inheritance. Also, even the narrator implies that Hoskuld's behaviour is not as it should, he says: “Høskuldr sefaðisk mjök við fortölur Jórunnar; þykkir honum þetta vera sannligt.”⁵⁴

“listening to Jorunn’s counsel, Hoskuld calmed down and saw the truth of her arguments”⁵⁵

⁵² Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934) , p. 47.

⁵³ Kunz, p. 302.

⁵⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 48.

⁵⁵ Kunz, p. 302.

and, “taka þeir nú upp frændsemi sína góða heðan í frá.”⁵⁶ “From that time onward the two got along as kinsmen should.”⁵⁷

In this conflict, Hoskuld stands completely alone with his view. Hoskuld does not want to give Hrut his part, at first because he thinks his mother already brought enough to Norway, implying that Hrut already had his inheritance, and later because he had not given his consent for the marriage between his mother and Hrut’s father. It seems as if Hoskuld is giving different excuses just so he does not need to give his brother what he wants. Or maybe he really thinks he has the law on his side when he states that his mother should not have gotten married without his consent. He seems to refer to a law from the *Grágás*, in this law book it states that “a son sixteen winters old or older, freeborn and a lawful heir and intelligent enough to take charge of his inheritance, is the man with the right to give his mother in betrothal.”⁵⁸ Hoskuld uses the law to his advantage, because he states that he should have given his consent, while in the law book it merely states that it is his right, not his duty. Since the *Grágás* are meant to be used in one’s advantage or disadvantage, Hoskuld is using them correctly, but his problem is that the rest of the people around him think he is doing the wrong thing. But, Hoskuld is chieftain of the district and maybe that is also why it is so difficult for the people surrounding him to do the right thing, since there is no one around who stands above Hoskuld in a legal or authorial sense. When using the law to his advantage, Hoskuld stands in his right when he means that he was not given the opportunity for giving his consent, but he does not have the law on his side when he means that the marriage is unlawful because he has not given his consent. It seems that he is angry that he was not given the opportunity to give his consent, but he tries to make the marriage look like it was against the law because he did not give his consent. It is not that strange that he was not given the opportunity, since his mother was in Norway at the time and he was in Iceland, taking care of the farm. Legally, Hoskuld is in his right, but practically he is demanding something that is

⁵⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 48.

⁵⁷ Kunz, p. 303.

⁵⁸ Dennis, p. 53, part I.

unreasonable, because it would have been very hard to make it a reality. Hoskuld might, also think that he needs to protect his family from anyone coming from the outside. The complete inheritance is probably worth enough to sustain his family when times get hard. Hoskuld might therefore also be thinking about the survival of his family, as it was before his half-brother showed up. But, he can not dismiss his extended family, even though he tries to use the law to dismiss his half-brother as not being his brother in a legal sense. Hoskuld wants to have control over his family; he wants to be the one in charge, even when it is not up to him to take charge. The situation with his brother is out of his hands and stands aside from his duties of protecting and taking care of the family.

Hoskuld seems to want to keep everything as it was when his mother died. He does not want to acknowledge Hrut as his (half) brother, because he does not acknowledge his mother's second marriage. But, when his wife insists that he should give up this conflict and give in, he eventually complies. Hoskuld maybe does not want to let someone new into his family, but he is reminded by everyone around him that someone who is related by blood is truly a family member who should be acknowledged as such. Thus, Hrut has right to his part of the inheritance, just as Hoskuld has. In the end, Hoskuld trusts the people closest to him when making his decision. In the community he is living in, blood ties are considered very important, important in such a way that he cannot ignore his half-brother for very long. The wisest thing for Hoskuld to do is to comply with the general consensus and give in, since this is the way the community behaves and he might be risking a bigger conflict with the rest of the community if he does not do so.

This episode shows how important loyalty towards family is in this saga, even when one does not know one's own family. The ethics of the community, concerning family, are stronger than those of one person, because they perceive family as very important. As mentioned above, family was vital to one's survival. In this case, Hoskuld might also be thinking of his family's survival, as extra wealth is very welcome when circumstances get

hard. But, he does not think that an extra family member, who maybe brings extra allies, could also be of great value. It is shown in this saga that when one needs to rely on family, a family bond is always important, whether one knows one's family or not. Perhaps Hoskuld's perception of the situation makes his decision a harder one. Hoskuld is the one who has been denied an opportunity, he is the one who is the head of the family and has to take care of his family. Now, someone suddenly shows up who threatens his position, because Hrut is there to take possessions from his family he can use very well. However, the people around him perceive this situation probably from a more objective point of view. To them family is the most important thing, therefore it must be logical to them to give Hrut his part of the inheritance. Hoskuld is probably conflicted by these different things, but is brought to his senses by his wife in the end. Hoskuld tries to stay loyal to what he believes or feels to be right, supported by the law, because an opportunity has been taken from him, but the ethics of the community, of the culture he is living in are stronger than what he thinks is right. He does not seem to think of his family including his half-brother, he only seems to think of maintaining of what was before his mother moved to Norway. By maintaining what was, within his family, he might think that his family has a bigger chance of survival when they keep the inheritance instead of giving it to Hrut.

Another episode in the *Laxdaela saga* where loyalty toward family plays an important role is where a woman named Gudrun wants to be with the man she is in love with.⁵⁹ Gudrun and Kjartan want to be together, but first Kjartan wants to spend several years abroad. This is a custom for many Icelandic men, to first go abroad to Norway in order to experience adventure there and then come back to start a family.⁶⁰ When Gudrun finds out Kjartan wants to go abroad, she tells him she wants to come with him. But Kjartan refuses, and says he thinks she should stay at home and take care of the farm, because her brothers are inexperienced and her father is old. He wants her to wait for him for three years. Gudrun is

⁵⁹ This episode begins in chapter 40, p. 345 (Kunz), p. 113 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

⁶⁰ This happens in other sagas as well, for example in *Grettis saga*.

not happy about it and says she will not wait for him. It seems that Kjartan is relying on Gudrun's loyalty and responsibility towards her family and probably a certain custom that if the head of the family is unable to take charge, one of the other (experienced) family members has to take responsibility.

In the *Grágás* one can find a law that resembles this. It is written that care of property 'is to be taken up in the same way as inheritance.'⁶¹ In the chapter 'inheritance' it is said that inheritance goes to the son when the father has died, when the son does not exist, it goes to the daughter and so on.⁶² So, it is the same with taking care of property. But, in this case, the father is still alive and the sons (Gudrun's brothers) are present too. But, her brothers are both inexperienced and her father is (too) old, and if her father would have died and she would not have had any brothers, she would have been the one to take care of the property. It seems likely that Kjartan is referring to this custom or law. Kjartan thinks of the survival of Gudrun's family, and he probably thinks that if Gudrun goes with him, her family will be ruined when there is no one to take care of the property. But, according to the *Grágás* she does not necessarily have to take care of the farm. Of course, Gudrun immediately expresses that she does not want to wait for him and thus she will stay behind anyway. But, Kjartan's point of view is different than Gudrun's as he sees their being apart as a necessary evil, because she has to take care of the family farm. Gudrun simply does not want to wait three years for him and she does not think of her loyalty towards her family in the first place, since she wants to come with him and he rejects her. Kjartan is trying to appeal to her sense of loyalty for her family, while Gudrun does not want to wait and maybe feels hurt because he does not want her to come with him and thus puts her family's survival above their love. He thinks their love will last for three years and her family farm will not, while she maybe thinks it to be the other way around. Kjartan is putting her in her place by saying she is the one to take care of her family and that she should wait for him. She then states she will not wait for him. She sees

⁶¹ Dennis, p. 12, part II.

⁶² Ibidem, p. 3, part II.

herself maybe more as an independent person who can make her own choices than Kjartan does. He sees her as someone with a duty to her family, while she maybe sees her as already being together with Kjartan? When he rejects her she decides for herself what is best to do, which naturally leads to her staying loyal to the bond she has with her family and her duty as most capable person in the family to take care of the farm. It might be that Kjartan reminded her of what is ‘the right thing to do’ and that her wishes are not in line with what is expected of her.

In another episode, Gudrun again feels the need to be loyal to her family rather than follow her own wishes.⁶³ Bolli, Kjartan's best friend, expresses after three years in Norway that he wants to go back to Iceland, but he knows that the king wants to keep Kjartan at his court. Kjartan does not oppose this because he is on good terms with the king and his daughter. Bolli suspects there is something going on between Kjartan and the king's daughter (an affair maybe?), but Kjartan tells him this is not true. When Bolli asks if he should give anyone in Iceland Kjartan's regards, Kjartan tells him Bolli should tell them everything is going fine. As it turns out, Bolli was implying that Kjartan sends his greetings to Gudrun, the woman Kjartan is supposed to be in love with. But Kjartan does not give any message to Bolli that he should give to Gudrun. Bolli returns to Iceland and pays Gudrun a visit. He tells her that Kjartan is having a good time and that he has no message for Gudrun. He also tells her that Kjartan is getting along well with the king's daughter. Bolli then asks Gudrun to marry him, but she refuses, as she states that there is no other man important to her but Kjartan “ekki þarftu slíkt at ræða, Bolli; engum manni mun ek giptask, meðan ek spyr Kjartan á lífi.”⁶⁴, “there’s no point in even discussing that, Bolli, I’ll marry no man as long as I know Kjartan is still alive.”⁶⁵ Bolli then goes to her father and asks her father for her hand. Her father gives his consent, but only if Gudrun has no problems with it. Gudrun's father discusses Bolli’s marriage proposal with Gudrun and he expresses that he thinks Bolli is a very good

⁶³ This episode begins in chapter 41, p. 353 (Kunz), p. 124 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

⁶⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p.128.

⁶⁵ Kunz, p. 354.

match for her, Gudrun then agrees with the marriage. Bolli and Gudrun get married just before Kjartan comes home from Norway.

The difficulty with this episode is that there is no indication as to why Bolli asks Gudrun to marry him. Nowhere in the saga is there any hint that Bolli might be in love with Gudrun, so one can only speculate about why. One would not expect Bolli to steal Kjartan's girlfriend when they have such a good friendship. Their bond was so strong that it is said that when Bolli and Kjartan were still fast friends "Bolli var í ferð með honum, því at svá var ástúðigt með þeim fóstbræðrum, at hvárrgi þóttisk nýta mega, at þeir væri eigi ásamt."⁶⁶ "Bolli accompanied Kjartan, as the affection between the foster-brothers was such that both of them felt something was missing in the other's absence."⁶⁷ A different reason as to why Bolli asks Gudrun to marry him is maybe because Bolli really believes that Kjartan will not return to Iceland. Bolli states "en ekki kemr mér at óvörum, þó at hans hafi hér í landi litlar nytjar ina næstu vetr."⁶⁸ "but it wouldn't surprise me if we saw little of him here at home during the coming years."⁶⁹ Whether Bolli really believes this or whether he tries to convince Gudrun to marry him is not clear.

When one looks at what the law says about such a situation, the *Grágás* state that when a couple is betrothed and the man neglects to marry the woman after a certain period of time that is stated, the betrothal will be ended according to law.⁷⁰ The man has no rights over the woman, as if they had never been betrothed. Even though Kjartan and Gudrun were not betrothed, Kjartan fails to come back after the promised three years, therefore Gudrun does not owe Kjartan anything. Gudrun is thus free to marry whomever she wants, since Bolli implied that Kjartan was most likely not coming back and her father thinks Bolli is a very good choice to marry, her decision to marry Bolli is not irrational.

The disloyalty of Bolli in his friendship with Kjartan can not be explained very easy,

⁶⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 114.

⁶⁷ Kunz, p. 345.

⁶⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p.127.

⁶⁹ Kunz, p. 354.

⁷⁰ Dennis, p. 269 , part II.

because it is hard to understand why Bolli would deliberately hurt Kjartan by ‘stealing’ Kjartan’s girl, when they have such a strong bond. What can be said about it is that Bolli seems to stay true only to his own desires or he really believes Kjartan is not coming back. It might be that Bolli in his own way has given Kjartan the opportunity to let him know if Gudrun was available or not, by asking Kjartan if he should give a message from Kjartan to the people back home or by asking Kjartan when he would go back to Iceland. When Kjartan answered these questions not as Bolli thought he would, Bolli might have thought that Kjartan was not interested in Gudrun anymore, and seen this as an approval to ask Gudrun to marry him. But this is all so subtle and vague, that Kjartan must not have understood that. Gudrun however, listens to her father and she apparently thinks her father’s opinion is important, because first she rejected Bolli but, when her father expresses how good a match Bolli would be for her, she gives in. Again, Gudrun seems to value the bond she has with her family more than what she actually wants or feels. Bolli probably assumes that Kjartan is not coming back therefore he seems to think that he can do what he wants, while valuing one’s family’s opinion is much more important to Gudrun than thinking of what she actually wants. Because Bolli only thinks of what he wants, this episode could also have been placed in the second category, but because Gudrun values the bond with her family so strongly, this episode was placed in this category. If it was not for Gudrun’s father, the marriage would not have taken place.

The marriage between Bolli and Gudrun results in a breach of the friendship between Bolli and Kjartan.⁷¹ But Olaf, Kjartan's father and Bolli's foster-father, tries to reconcile them; he has the opinion that there is no stronger bond than between foster-brothers. He reminds Kjartan that no one was as close to him as Bolli was. The bond between the brothers, even though they are not related by blood, they are brothers, is very important. Kjartan does as his father wishes and tries to make up with Bolli. Bolli offers Kjartan horses, but Kjartan refuses the gift, stating that he is not a man for horses. Because Kjartan refuses the gift, there is still no warmth between Kjartan and Bolli. On the one hand Kjartan is loyal towards his family, he

⁷¹ This episode begins in chapter 45, p. 359 (Kunz), p. 135 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson , 1934).

tries to do as his father wishes, to make amends with Bolli, but on the other hand he does not succeed. Whether this is because he really does not like the horses or because he still does not like Bolli, but just wants to please his father, is difficult to deduce. Kjartan could have used either of these reasons to reject Bolli's gift. What one could say is that the right thing to do for Kjartan is to accept Bolli's gift if he wants to make amends. If he had been loyal to his fathers' wishes, he would have accepted them. Kjartan's sense for ethics seems to be mixed up because of his anger, but still he knows what he should do and tries to do it, even though he fails. Here, again, the importance of family ties in Medieval Iceland is shown.

The feud between Kjartan and Bolli goes on and they get into a fight.⁷² Before the fight, Gudrun had already expressed that she thought Bolli should stand up to Kjartan especially when he is near where they live. Bolli is reluctant. Gudrun has persuaded her kinsman to ambush Kjartan and still Bolli does not want to go, because he thinks it is wrong to attack his kinsman. But when Gudrun threatens that it will be the end of their lives together if Bolli does not go, Bolli decides to go. When they encounter Kjartan's group, Bolli does not fight at first, but when Kjartan sees him, Kjartan starts to yell at him for not fighting. A friend of Bolli urges Bolli to fight Kjartan, and at this Bolli is persuaded and draws his sword in order to get ready for the fight. Kjartan then exclaims that this is wrong and reminds him that they are kinsmen. He also states that it is better to die at Bolli's hands than to kill Bolli. Kjartan then throws his weapons to the ground and Bolli kills him, Bolli regrets the act immediately. Kjartan's brothers want to avenge the act immediately, but Kjartan's father, Olaf, does not want that to happen. Because he raised both men, instead he sends his other sons to attack the men who were with Bolli and he allows them to kill these men. Olaf wanted a fine for compensation from Bolli for Kjartan's death, and not outlawry, because of their family bond. But Kjartan's mother could not handle it the way Olaf did. She urges her sons to attack Bolli and she comes with them to oversee the attack. After Bolli has been killed and his sons have grown older, Bolli's sons avenge their father's death.

⁷² This episode begins in chapter 49, p. 370 (Kunz), p. 151 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

It is strange that Kjartan first provokes Bolli to fight, but the moment Bolli draws his sword, Kjartan declares how wrong it is. Does he simply want to show that he is stronger than Bolli without actually fighting him? Kjartan stays loyal to the foster-brother bond they have and it seems that Bolli also stays true to this bond and only acts in the heat of the moment, because he immediately regrets it. The importance of the foster-family bond is also shown by Olaf, who refuses to have Bolli killed even though his wife and sons think otherwise. Could it be that Bolli had put all his ethics aside, as the killing happened in the heat of the moment provoked by both Kjartan's and Gudrun's words, while Kjartan reminds himself of his own ethics, that family is the most important thing and that one needs to stay loyal to family, even if it is at the last possible moment, when it is actually already too late?

These episodes all appear in the *Laxdaela saga*, but in the *Vatnsdaela saga* this loyalty towards family also appears, even though the episodes where it happens are complicated, because choices of the characters the episodes evolve around are even less well explained than in the *Laxdaela saga*.

In the first significant episode, a father judges his son's behaviour, which leads to the son taking action quite drastically.⁷³ The father, Ketil, is a chieftain in Norway who went on raiding trips when he was younger but settled down as he got older. People in the district had come to believe that there were robbers along a road between Jamtland and Romsdal, because no one who took that road ever came back. The people said that the chieftain, Ketil, did not prove to be a good leader and had grown old. Ketil did not do anything, but thought about what had been said. At a feast, Ketil talks to his son and tells him how things used to be and how much has changed since then. In this scene, no real action takes place, but by judging his son's behaviour Ketil expresses what is important to him. Ketil says that the behaviour of young men today is not the same as when he was young. When Ketil was young, men

“Önnur gerisk nú atferð ungra manna en þá er ek var ungr, þá girntusk menn á nokkur framaverk, annattveggja at ráðask í hernað eða afla fjár ok sóma með einhverjum atferðum,

⁷³ This episode begins in chapter 1, p. 189(Wawn), p. 1 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1939).

þeim er nokkur mannhætta var í”⁷⁴, ““hankered after deeds of derring-do, either by going raiding or by winning wealth and honour through exploits in which there was some element of danger.”⁷⁵ He then expresses that nowadays the men do not do this any more, they rather stay at home and thus do not gain any bravery or manliness. Ketil won wealth and honour because he faced danger. His son, Thorstein, to whom he is expressing this, does not do this and Ketil is expressing his concern, because Thorstein is not strong and big and therefore will not gain any honour. By degrading his son, Ketil is trying to provoke him into going on a dangerous raid and it works.

Thorstein gets angry and decides to go off into the forest where he might encounter villains. As Thorstein sets off into the woods to go after these villains, he encounters a house probably owned by a robber, which he breaks into. Thorstein remembers everything his father told him, including that it is honourable for young men to go on raids to gain honour for themselves. When he breaks into the house the owner is not yet home and Thorstein hides until the man has come home and gone to bed. When the man, who is called Jokul, is fast asleep, Thorstein attacks him. Jokul is upset and wonders if he has ever harmed Thorstein or his family, so that Thorstein has a reason to attack him. He knows he has not done this and thinks about giving Thorstein what he deserves by hitting him back, but he does not do this because he experiences the attack by Thorstein as a punishment for all the wrong he has done in his life: “því at ævin hefir ófögr verit, enda er nú goldit at verðugu”⁷⁶, ““my life has been an ugly one and now has the reward it deserves, and that’s the way it goes with most wrongdoers.”⁷⁷ Jokul tells him that he understands Thorstein must have been provoked into this situation by his father Ketil “ok allmjök muntu eggjaðr verit hafa þessa verks af feðr þínum”⁷⁸, ““but you must have been sorely provoked into this by your father””.⁷⁹ He gives Thorstein gold and tells him that Thorstein should go to his father to marry his sister. Jokul

⁷⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), pp. 4-5.

⁷⁵ Wawn, pp. 189-190.

⁷⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 11.

⁷⁷ Wawn, p. 193.

⁷⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 11.

⁷⁹ Wawn, p. 193.

praises Thorstein for his daring and manliness and that he will become a great leader. After Jokul is killed by Thorstein, Thorstein goes to Jokul's father to marry Jokul's sister. First he explains to Jokul's mother what happened between Jokul and him. Jokul had given Thorstein gold that his family would recognise as being Jokul's to gain their trust. Jokul's mother believes what Thorstein tells her and promises him that he will keep his life, because Jokul promised him this. Only Jokul's father, the earl, needed to be convinced of Jokul being a good man. Thorstein needs to hide himself, while Jokul's mother convinces the earl. She tells him how noble their son acted before he died and how brave it is of Thorstein to come to a region hostile to him. Jokul's father wants to see Thorstein for himself and be able to decide what he will do with him. He likes Thorstein, so he spares his life and allows Thorstein to marry his daughter (Jokul's sister).

In the beginning of this episode Thorstein's father imposes his own values and morals onto his son; his son is provoked by this and thus obeys his father's wishes. Whether Thorstein agrees with his father or not is unclear, but what is clear is that Thorstein is heavily influenced by his father's words. He says so himself, “eggjat væri nú, ef nokkut tjóaði.”⁸⁰ “If ever provocation worked, this would be provocation enough.”⁸¹ His father's words urge Thorstein to prove that he is able to gain honour the way his father used to do. His reaction is stronger than what his own opinion might be on the matter and because people expect his father to do something about the highway robbers, Thorstein might have also felt that as additional pressure to do his father's bidding. Apparently, his father's opinion, and maybe his father's good name as a chieftain, means a lot to him. As the episode continues, when Thorstein has killed Jokul, it is hard to see if Thorstein's actions are driven by his own morals and values, because first it seems he is driven by the morals and values of his father and later by the things Jokul told him. Because Jokul felt guilty for what he had done to other people, he experienced Thorstein's attack as a punishment and allowed Thorstein to get away with it

⁸⁰ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 6.

⁸¹ Wawn, p. 190.

as it was the right thing to do in Jokul's eyes. By making Thorstein's life better, Jokul might be making an attempt to set right the wrong he has done in his life. Jokul feels he needs to be punished and when it happens he does not want to do anything against it. He might be paying off his wrongdoings or maybe his sins, if one looks at it from a Christian perspective, in order to make himself a better man right before he dies. Jokul puts his life in Thorstein's hands and Jokul even tells Thorstein the opposite things that Thorstein's father had told him to provoke him.

First, Thorstein is led by his emotions when he takes action and then later on he keeps his promise (visiting Jokul's father), this makes it hard to deduce what the ethics of Thorstein are. When Thorstein returns home he tells everyone that now it is safe on the road, because he has killed a highway robber and he gets a lot of praise and honour for it. The ethics of Jokul and Thorstein and Thorstein's father all come together in this episode, even though Thorstein's seem to be hidden, because they do not come forward that clearly. Jokul knows that the things he has done are wrong and he undergoes his punishment (whether this is under the influence of Christianity or not, one can not say from this context). Thorstein does what his father wants him to do: kill a robber in a fight, to bring honour to himself and gain worldly goods. Thorstein also honours the deal he made with Jokul in that he will kill Jokul and visit his family and in exchange Jokul would not fight him. Jokul's family honours their son by complying with his wishes for Thorstein. Although it seems that Jokul's father wants to make the decision for himself, he might have been influenced by Jokul and Thorstein's story. This episode centres around taking care of one's family, because Thorstein acted the way his father wanted him to act, which resulted in him solving his father's problem; to get rid of the highway robber. Thorstein has thus done his family a service and has kept his father's honour intact.

In another episode in the *Vatnsdaela saga*, a group of brothers are dividing the inheritance of their father, Ingimund, who had just died.⁸² The son who has been the head of

⁸² This episode begins in chapter 27, p. 230 (Wawn), p. 71 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1939).

the group of brothers, Thorstein, takes the lead in this. The other brothers do not complain, but follow his lead. Thorstein wants to choose first and he decides to take the homestead, the land and the livestock. Immediately his brothers say that this is hardly just a single item and that it seems greedy of him to choose so much. Thorstein agrees, but he explains that their honour will be at its greatest if they are united and that he himself has the most foresight in this matter. He probably means that as a family they are at their strongest and maybe also wealthiest when the farm (including land and livestock) is under the authority of one person, namely Thorstein. Also, if they were to divide the land, farm and livestock, this could result in the decline of their family's wealth, since one big farm has more than a few separate smaller farms. He might also be implying that they should not disagree and let him take what he wants, to keep the family together. Even though his choice seems to be self-centred at first, after this has been explained and when he agrees that they are right and that he is greedy, his choice is approved by his brothers. Thorstein was always the one leading the group of brothers, so this would be a logical explanation for his action.

Thorstein might be self-centred, but he is thinking about his family's honour. The action he takes is then driven by the duty he feels towards his family to take that action that will make sure his family's honour will stay intact. But it could also be viewed differently. Thorstein could be using the excuse about his family's honour in order to get what he wants. Because he has been the leader of the group of brothers and always taken the decisions for them, he might think that he is privileged to getting the most of the family's inheritance. But, maybe he knows that that is not completely the right thing to do, so he makes up the excuse about family honour. Of course, this is pure speculation, but when reading the episode at first it seems that Thorstein dismisses the argument about him being greedy a bit too quickly. But that is also the interpretation of the modern reader. And since his brothers give in very easily, it is logical to assume that his argument about keeping the family honour is a valid one.

Thorstein is judged in this episode, but his arguments are compelling enough to let him be the

leader of the family.

An episode that could have been placed in this category, but was placed in the category about staying loyal to oneself, is about a dispute over land. It is another episode about Kjartan, Bolli and Gudrun. This is a scene about Bolli and Gudrun who want to buy a piece of land, but they do not have enough witnesses to make the buy legal. Kjartan finds out about this and buys the land, something he can do because he makes sure he has enough witnesses. Gudrun wants to confront Kjartan in order to maintain their honour. But since Gudrun and Kjartan have a history together, she did not seem to act out of a need to protect her family, but out of a need to oppose Kjartan and maybe have some kind of revenge. This makes the episode unreliable to be put in the first category, and so, instead, it was placed in the second, which is about staying loyal to oneself.

Loyalty towards oneself

In the *Laxdaela saga*, there is a big conflict concerning three marriages.⁸³ Thord Ingrunnarson is married to Aud and he is friends with another married couple, Thorvald and Gudrun. As part of their marriage agreement, Thorvald is obliged to buy Gudrun many precious goods; this was something her father demanded of Thorvald if he wanted to marry her. Gudrun does not feel much affection for Thorvald, but she enjoys the goods Thorvald buys her. When Gudrun demands Thorvald to buy her even more expensive objects, Thorvald gets angry and hits her in the face. In the meantime, Thord has been visiting Thorvald and Gudrun's farm often and he has become close friends with Gudrun and Thorvald, until there is a rumour that Thord and Gudrun have been getting very close. When Thorvald has slapped her in the face, Gudrun goes to Thord and tells what has happened. He advises her to make clothes for her husband which are very low cut, which makes them look like woman's clothes, so she can

⁸³ This episode begins in chapter 34, p. 332(Kunz), p. 93 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson , 1934).

divorce him.⁸⁴ In the following spring, Gudrun and Thorvald get divorced. Gudrun and Thord are still in touch and Gudrun brings it to Thord's attention that there is a rumour that his wife is wearing men's clothes. It is not told in the saga where this rumour came from and whether Gudrun really saw Thord's wife wearing men's clothing. It could be that Gudrun made up the rumour, so that Thord would have a reason to divorce his wife. But one can not get this information from the saga. After Gudrun has told Thord, he asks Gudrun for advice when to divorce his wife. Thord then announces his divorce at the Althing, without his wife being present. Thord's ex wife is upset about the divorce and one night she breaks into the house of Thord, when he and Gudrun are asleep and she stabs Thord. She manages to get away unnoticed, but Thord knows she stabbed him. Still, he does not want to take action, because he thinks it is justified what she has done, since he did not treat her right when he divorced her. However, hardly any emotions are described. This makes it difficult to interpret, because no reason is given as to why Gudrun and Thord get married. At first it seems that Thord and Gudrun had some kind of affair when they were still married to their ex-spouses, but it is nowhere clear that this was their reason to get a divorce. Apparently this is no ground for getting divorced, but when Thorvald hits Gudrun, she has a reason to hate him and to figure out a plan to get divorced. A reason for the divorce is created in this way for Gudrun to leave her husband. Thord is Gudrun's second husband and earlier in the saga, Gudrun had a dream that was foretelling about how many husbands she would have, what would happen to them and how she would feel about them. About her first husband, Thorvald, it is said that she will care less for him and that she will leave him. About Thord it is said that she will care greatly for him.

Dreams have a special meaning in the sagas, they are often predictions of the future and considered to be true. As Lars Lönnroth states in his article 'Dreams in the sagas': "unlike psychoanalysts, saga narrators do not primarily see dreams as a key to the inner soul but as a

⁸⁴ In the translated edition of the saga, it is said that when a man or a woman wears clothes from the other sex, their spouses can divorce them. I looked it up in the *Grágás* and there it is said that one will become a lesser outlaw when they wear the clothes from the other sex. Kunz, p. 332, Dennis, p. 219 and pp. 69-70, part II.

key to the future”.⁸⁵ He also mentions that dreams often are used as a narrative device to show the reader a bit of information about what is coming next. It is then logical to say that the dream Gudrun had is a correct prediction of the future and that the characters in the saga perceived this dream as a correct representation of the future. It is then likely to assume that Gudrun indeed cared greatly for Thord, and it might be assumed that that is why she married him. It is never told in the saga how the characters feel about each other, except in the dream vision and the rumour that they were close, so it would have been hard to say that they married out of love for each other. But, I think it can be said that they used the law, or a certain custom, to get what they wanted, to marry each other, which makes them both cunning people. In the *Grágás* it is said that when a man wears women’s clothing and a man wears men’s clothing, this is both grounds for lesser outlawry.⁸⁶ But it does not say in the *Grágás* what happens to their marriage. It looks like this saga did not follow the law in the *Grágás* completely, but it is established in both this saga and in the *Grágás* that transvestism was not permitted in Icelandic society at that time. When Thorvald hit Gudrun she had a reason to be angry at him and started thinking about a divorce, taking advantage of something that was initially offensive. The divorce of Thord and his wife is a bit more vague, because Gudrun tells him that his wife is walking around in breeches, but Thord never checks for himself if it is true, and so Gudrun might as well have lied about it just so Thord would have a reason to divorce his wife. Thord divorces his wife at the Althing, but his ex-wife was not present as it is said in the saga that she learnt of the news and said:

“Vel es ek veit þat,
vask ein of látin.”⁸⁷

“Kind of him to leave me so

⁸⁵ Lönnroth , p. 456.

⁸⁶ Dennis, p. 219 and pp. 69-70, part II.

⁸⁷ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 96.

and let me be the last to know.”⁸⁸

When Thord is stabbed by his wife, a friend of Thord wants to pursue and punish her, but Thord stops him. The narrator tells us that she deserves punishment, but Thord thinks that what his ex-wife has done was “sagði hana slíkt hafa at gort, sem hon átti”⁸⁹, “only evening the score”.⁹⁰ It seems that Thord can imagine how angry his wife must be and that the way he divorced her caused a personal reaction. By allowing her to attack him, there are no unresolved issues between them any more. The brothers of Thord's ex-wife, Aud, were pleased about the punishment, but they thought he deserved worse. So, here the characters are not acting according to any law. Aud feels she has been treated wrongly and takes action; whether this is because she wants to restore her honour or just because she is angry is not clear. What can be said is that she does this for herself and for no one else, even though other people express that she should have punished Thord harder or that she should not have done it in the first place. Her reaction is considered to be right since Thord treated her wrong, but the severity of her reaction is questioned by the people around her. Thord is the only one who does not question her reaction. Thord could have pursued her and punished her for what she has done, but he agrees that now they are even. Aud was not influenced by anything else but her own feelings concerning the divorce, and therefore her actions stand completely alone. There is no one who told her what to do and this is interesting to see, since both Thord's and Gudrun's actions were influenced by each other's advice.

In this episode, the actions taken by the characters concern only themselves, they do not act according to some kind of loyalty towards their family or the community they live in, for they seem to be completely self-involved. Thord and Gudrun seem to be thinking about each other, but, nevertheless, the way they act does not contribute anything to their family or community. When they get married, there is of course a change for both of their families, but

⁸⁸ Kunz, p. 334.

⁸⁹ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 98.

⁹⁰ Kunz, p. 335, p. 98.

it is not explicitly said in the sagas what kind of change it means for both families. Therefore one can assume that Thord and Gudrun only stay loyal to themselves. Their ethics do not lie anywhere else but with their own wishes. Aud also only thinks of herself, of her own anger. From the point of view of Thord's friends and family Aud is wrong, but from Aud's point of view (and her family's) she is right. Aud most probably acts according to her own ethics and since Thord considers them to be even after her retribution, he probably knew up front that he could have expected this when he divorced her in front of the Althing without her being present.

In the next episode of the *Laxdaela saga* that belongs in this category, Kjartan arrives in Norway and gets to know the king during a swimming contest.⁹¹ The king has become a Christian and he wants everyone else in his kingdom to become a Christian as well, even the people who are only there to visit, like Kjartan and his friends. The king demands this from everyone and if they do not do his bidding, he will force them to convert with the use of violence. Kjartan refuses to convert to Christianity, but when the king organises the Christian festivities, Kjartan becomes curious. He and his best friend Bolli go and watch the festivities and like what they see (especially Kjartan). Kjartan then expresses that he has an interest in the Christian faith and that he wants to be converted. The king grants his request and after Kjartan is christened, his entourage follows.

What is interesting about this episode is that the king does not try to convince Kjartan to become a Christian in a violent way. He does not force Kjartan and his group to become Christian. Instead, the king believes that it is much better for Kjartan to become a Christian when he does so out of his own accord rather than it being forced upon him. But the king forces other people into Christianity. At first, it seems as if the king is impressed by Kjartan's character and, in a way, I think he is, but the most important thing is that the king recognises Kjartan's leadership. He knows that when Kjartan has become a Christian out of his own free will, he will be able to convince his group and he will be able to convince a lot of people in

⁹¹ This episode begins in chapter 40, p. 345 (Kunz), p. 113 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

Iceland as well. The way the king acts in this episode seems to come from a diplomatic point of view rather than from moralistic grounds. But, maybe, there is a certain moral in the way the king acts here. The king is not acting in a crude manner he does not force his will on anyone that visits his realm. He apparently knows when he should treat certain people differently from others to reach his goal.

The next episode is again about the feud between Bolli and Kjartan.⁹² In this episode they are quarrelling over a piece of land. Bolli and Gudrun want to purchase a piece of land and they come to an agreement with the seller, but there are no witnesses to make it legal. When Kjartan hears of this, he goes to the owner of the piece of land and he makes sure there are enough witnesses and he buys the piece of land. Kjartan expresses to the man who sells him the land that he does not want Bolli and Gudrun to buy it, and he states that, since there were no witnesses present when they bought it, there is no real agreement. When Gudrun and Bolli hear of this, Gudrun gets angry at Bolli and states that Kjartan has left them no choice but to hand over the district and gain little respect or to confront Kjartan and be less spineless. She thus urges Bolli to confront Kjartan. Bolli does not react to what she says. To Gudrun, it seems better to confront Kjartan and keep some self-respect than to let him take land that they wanted to have. Gudrun wants to take what is theirs, but Bolli does not want to confront Kjartan. Gudrun thinks about the honour of her family and Bolli seems to think about the bond he had with Kjartan, while Kjartan only thinks about himself. This conflict is about honour, but also about when to stand up for oneself and when to let something go. The ethics of Gudrun and Bolli are different; why this is so, one can only speculate. It could be that Gudrun still has feelings for Kjartan and she wants to show him who is in charge, or she might hate Kjartan so much that she wants to confront him when the situation presents itself. She is probably also angry at him because he took their land. It is also interesting that Kjartan does not want Bolli and Gudrun to have the piece of land. Why this is, is not clear, but it could be for the same reasons I suggested Gudrun could have. Gudrun here acts purely out of self-

⁹² This episode begins in chapter 47, p. 365(Kunz), p. 144 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson , 1934).

interest and she does not take into account the bond Bolli and Kjartan once had, and neither does Kjartan. The only one who seems to do so is Bolli, but whether he really thinks about the bond or whether he is just afraid and does not want to get into a fight with Kjartan is not said. Kjartan clearly thinks only about himself. He has a problem with Bolli and Gudrun, therefore if it is in his power to oppose them he will, since it serves his purpose. In this situation both Gudrun and Kjartan act completely out of self-interest; even though Gudrun seems to be thinking about the honour of herself and Bolli, Kjartan might be only thinking of taking vengeance. The ethics of the characters in this scene are quite mixed with each of them having their own agenda.

In one of the episodes in the *Vatnsdaela saga*, a Norwegian named Hrafn comes to Iceland and Ingimund offers him hospitality.⁹³ Ingimund notices that Hrafn has a nice sword with him that seems to be worth a lot. He asks Hrafn if he will sell him his sword, but Hrafn says that he can not do that because he might need his weapon again. Instead he offers to give Ingimund payment for his hospitality. Ingimund is offended by the answer and thinks about what to do. He decides to take Hrafn into a temple, to talk about his Viking raids because Hrafn likes to do so. But, Hrafn always carries his sword with him and Ingimund tells him he can not bring it into a temple, because that is not the custom and that he also will expose himself to the wrath of the gods. Hrafn says that Ingimund will have to deal with it and Ingimund offers to take the sword in order to claim it as his own so he can say he has control over it. Hrafn agrees and gives his sword to Ingimund. Ingimund has reached his goal to obtain the sword and it will stay in his family for a long time. In this episode, it is interesting to see that Ingimund has no problem at all in achieving what he wants, even though it is by questionable means. It is not clear if the reasons Ingimund gives are valid reasons, as it is hard to verify whether or not it was allowed to bring weapons into a temple and whether it would make a big difference that Ingimund takes responsibility for the weapon. Perhaps this has something to do with him being the host and Hrafn being the guest and thus Ingimund makes

⁹³ This episode begins in chapter 17, p. 214(Wawn), p. 47 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson , 1939).

the rules and knows the law, even if it is one that he has made up himself. But, the most important feature of this episode is Ingimund's greed; he sees the sword and he wants it, thus he devises a scheme through which he can get it, even though he knows Hrafn will probably need the sword in the future. Maybe he wanted to have the sword even more because he was insulted by Hrafn's offer to pay him for his hospitality. It might be that this offer triggered a reaction in Ingimund which caused him to put his ethics of a good host aside and lure Hrafn into the temple. But, by using the argument of the wrath of the gods against Hrafn he is testing if Hrafn's awe or maybe fear for the gods is stronger than the fear of any future enemies Hrafn will encounter. His duty to be a good host does not prevent him from taking action and deceive his guest. He puts aside his ethics of being a good host to get what he wants. In this episode, aside from Hrafn, there is no one who judges Ingimund about his actions and Ingimund acts completely out of self-interest.

In another episode of the *Vatnsdaela saga*, a conflict centres on Thorstein from Hof, who was a generous man.⁹⁴ He offered goods and free food to his neighbours, and any traveller in need of a change of horses could count on him. People from other districts felt obliged to first visit him when coming to the district and tell him what was going on in the other districts. One day, a group of people were in his meadow, who were letting their horses graze. They were dressed in coloured clothing and one of them was wearing a cloak of quality cloth. The bottom of this cloak was covered in mud and the man took his knife and cut a strip off, which he threw away. He said that he did not want to be covered in muck. Thorstein's workers saw this and a servant woman picked up the piece of cloth the man had thrown away. She expressed that she thought the man was a show-off. In the evening Thorstein's workers reported to Thorstein what had happened and Thorstein said that he thought the people were either fools or very arrogant, if they destroyed their own valuable belongings (the cloak) even if they were covered in mud and let their horses graze on someone else's land. The man who threw away the piece of cloth is called Berg the Bold and is known to be a bully. Later on in

⁹⁴ This episode begins in chapter 31, p. 238 (Wawn), p. 85 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1939).

the saga (a few pages later) it becomes clear what kind of annoying man Berg is.⁹⁵ Without being provoked he acts in a rude manner.

In this episode, a slumbering conflict is at the centre. There is no actual fighting, but by what people say and how they react, one can see that there is certain hostility between the groups. Berg the Bold is not from that region, but he is on his way to visit Finnbogi. When he arrives, Finnbogi expresses that it would have been polite if Berg had paid a visit to Thorstein. From the introduction of this episode, it is understood that travellers were customary to visit Thorstein when entering the region. Berg, however, states that he had no business there and therefore did not see the need to do so. But he did see the need to show off his arrogance and he had no problem being rude and let his horses graze on Thorstein's land. Thorstein says about Berg's action that the man is either a fool or arrogant. Thorstein thinks Berg and his group to be fools for throwing away a valuable piece of cloth or they are arrogant to show off their wealth like this. The code of conduct concerning travellers in Thorstein's district is opposed by Berg, since he does not want to abide by these standards and he shows off his arrogance by publicly defying Thorstein's hospitality. Berg's action is condemned both by Thorstein and by Finnbogi. Finnbogi sees it as impolite not to pay a visit to an important person of the region and Thorstein denounces the way Berg introduces himself to the region. Even if Berg did not want to pay a visit to other people besides Finnbogi, he felt the need to let people know that he had arrived and was not afraid to show what kind of man he is. He does not need to be friends with Thorstein, since he is wealthy and powerful enough to take care of himself. He lets his horses graze on other people's land without their approval, which makes him an arrogant man. He does what he wants, even if this leads to making some enemies. But, it was already established that Berg was a bully and Thorstein calls him “inn mesti ofrkappsmaðr”⁹⁶ “the most mulish of men”.⁹⁷ According to Thorstein, Berg is a man who does not know how to do the right thing, as he is a man who does not care for any codes

⁹⁵ Chapter 31-32.

⁹⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 85.

⁹⁷ Wawn, p. 239.

of conduct in the new district he visits. Besides, one might consider it foolish to just cut off a piece of clothing in a country where objects like that are hard to get by. It is also said in the episode that the group was wearing coloured clothing, a sign of wealth. Perhaps he wanted to let Thorstein know that he, Berg, is just as much a powerful and wealthy man as Thorstein is, and that he does not abide to any customs of a region he is visiting because he is wealthy and powerful enough not to be obliged to do so. Later on in the saga, Thorstein says to Berg “ok ætlaðir mik þat lítilmenni, at ek mynda hirða, hvar hestar þínir bitu gras”⁹⁸, “and thought that I was such a petty-minded individual that I would worry about where your horses were eating the grass”⁹⁹. Hereby, Thorstein affirms that the struggle between Thorstein and Berg is one of power. To Thorstein, this is not about who is more powerful but who behaves in the right way. Perhaps to Thorstein it is also about that one knows that it is probably better to have powerful allies, instead of provoking these potential allies, in a culture where strife plays an important part.

An episode in the *Vatnsdaela saga* about a fishing agreement could also have been placed in this category.¹⁰⁰ This is a scene about a group of men who all have the right to fish from the same spot. But one of them is not liked by the others and, therefore an agreement has been made that this man is only allowed to fish there when the others are not present. The man does not agree with the arrangement so he just keeps on fishing whenever he likes to, also when the other men are around. This scene was placed in the category ‘loyalty towards the community’ because the other men try to make the situation work, while the other man does not care. From earlier in the saga it is known that this man always was difficult because he always had trouble with other people. From this information it is understood that his actions were not because of any values he has himself (which would place the scene in this category) but because he has put all his own ethics aside and just does not care. The other men try to protect the community from this man, so they make an agreement. That is why the

⁹⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 94.

⁹⁹ Wawn, p. 246.

¹⁰⁰ See the last category.

episode was not placed in this category, but in the third.

There is another episode from the *Laxdaela saga* that could also have been placed in this category. It is the episode where Bolli asks Gudrun to marry him, even though Gudrun is in love with Kjartan, Bolli's foster-brother and best friend.¹⁰¹ Gudrun agrees to marry him when her father tells her he thinks that Bolli is a good match. Gudrun listens to her family and in this way stays true to her family, which is why this episode was placed in the category about staying loyal to one's family. But Bolli's action seems to come from his own set of moral values. Even though he is best friends with Kjartan, he still tries to marry Gudrun, which he most likely does because he thinks Kjartan will not come back from Norway where he is staying. This way, he does not need to take Kjartan's feelings into account, because Kjartan is not in Iceland, and Bolli can follow his own wishes. This could have been a good reason to put this episode in this category, but because of Gudrun's loyalty towards her father, the scene was placed in the category about family loyalty.

And there is yet another episode from the *Vatnsdaela saga* that could have been placed in this category. In this episode Thorstein and his brother divide their inheritance and Thorstein chooses first.¹⁰² He takes a lot of the possessions, the farm, the land and the livestock. At first it seems a selfish act from Thorstein, but as it turns out he does this to keep the family's belongings together. He stays loyal to his family, even though he seems a bit self-centred at first.

Loyalty towards the community

In *Laxdaela saga* a man named Eldgrim wants to have horses owned by a man named Thorleik.¹⁰³ At the Althing he approaches Thorleik and tries to buy the horses from him, in exchange for which he will give Thorleik the same amount of horses and additional payment.

¹⁰¹ See the category about staying loyal to one's family.

¹⁰² See the category about loyalty toward one's family.

¹⁰³ This episode begins in chapter 37, p. 338 (Kunz), p. 102 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 1934).

Thorleik expresses that he is no horse dealer and simply will not sell his horses. Eldgrim responds that he now believes the rumours, that Thorleik is an arrogant and stubborn man. Eldgrim tells Thorleik that he will take a look at the horses in the summer and that then they will find out who will get the horses. Thorleik responds that Eldgrim should do what he wants, as long as he does not outnumber Thorleik with the amount of men he will bring. Several people who overhear the conversation said that if they would go through with this conflict, they would end up with what each of them deserved. But Eldgrim does not attack Thorleik, he just takes the horses when Thorleik is asleep in his bed. A relative of Thorleik, Hrut, sees this and asks him what he is doing. Eldgrim states that he is simply doing what he promised Thorleik at the Althing, namely getting the horses. Hrut replies that if he really were to keep his word, Eldgrim should face Thorleik before taking his horses. But Eldgrim refuses to do this, so Hrut attacks Eldgrim and kills him, for which Hrut gets a lot of respect. Thorleik is very angry that Hrut did this and even says that what Hrut did was “at honum hafði illt til gengit”¹⁰⁴ “badly meant”¹⁰⁵. Thorleik feels he has been put to shame, while Hrut thinks he has done Thorleik a favour.

It is both interesting that Hrut gets a lot of respect for this deed and that Thorleik is so angry about it. It seems that Thorleik truly believes that Hrut meant to do wrong. But, it could also be that Thorleik is angry at Hrut because of all the respect Hrut gets and Thorleik does not, and that is why he feels he has been put to shame; however, there is no further indication for this in the saga. It simply states that Thorleik gets very angry and that he says that there will be consequences to Hrut's actions. The reason Hrut gets all the respect is perhaps because many people dislike Eldgrim. In the saga, the narrator often implicitly says that Eldgrim is not a nice person. It is not mentioned that there are any other people who like him, or who want to take revenge for his death, Hrut gets respect for the killing, because Eldgrim was disliked by many people and his actions were judged as being wrong. Hrut has done the community (and

¹⁰⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1934), p. 105

¹⁰⁵ Kunz, p. 340.

Thorleik) a favour by killing Eldgrim, which makes him a respectable man. Hrut has stayed loyal to his family and community by getting rid of someone who was undesirable. But Thorleik keeps his promise and the episode continues when Thorleik takes action against Hrut. Thorleik sends tenants of his to Hrut's house to perform magic on Hrut and his family for what Hrut has done to Eldgrim. These tenants were a family that had recently moved to Iceland, a father named Kotkel, his wife Grima and their two sons. They came originally from the Hebrides and all of them were skilled in witchcraft. Initially they settled down in Urdir in Skalmarfjord, but they did not receive a warm welcome from the other inhabitants. The mother of a man named Thord went to her son to tell him she needed protection from this family because they stole her livestock and practised witchcraft. Thord charged this family with theft and witchcraft, for which the punishment is full outlawry. They would have to answer these charges at the Althing, but Kotkel and his sons get so outraged that they started chanting incantations, which caused a storm to emerge. This storm caused Thord's ship to sink and all aboard perished. The man under whose authority Kotkel and his family were staying, Hallstein, told Kotkel and his family to move somewhere else because of the trouble they had made. Now they went to the district where Thorleik was living and they became his tenants, and for him they go after Hrut and his family with their witchcraft. Hrut knows what they are trying to do and he knows how to protect himself and his family from the magic. He warns everyone not to go outside, but his youngest son does not listen as he goes outside and gets killed. Hrut pursues Kotkel and his family and kills them by stoning them to death.

The revenge Hrut takes for the death of his son is a logical action. In the *Grágás* it is stated that one has a right to take revenge for a killing.

“It is prescribed that a man on whom injury is inflicted has the right to avenge himself if he wants to up to the time of the General Assembly [Althing] at which he is required to bring a case for the injuries; and the same applies to everyone who has the right to avenge a killing.

Those who have the right to avenge a killing are the principals in a killing case.”¹⁰⁶

It was not always usual to avenge a killing, what happened often as well was *wergild*; this was the paying off of a killing with money. However, this does not happen in Hrut’s case, Jesse Byock states that there was a difference between manslaughter and murder in Medieval Iceland, manslaughter “was a killing publicly acknowledged by the perpetrator shortly after the act, and could be atoned for through compensation.”¹⁰⁷ Murder however, was an act that brought shame to the perpetrator, which led to revenge killings. In this case, the way Hrut’s son was murdered was perceived as a shameful act. Hrut and his men go after Kotkel and his family to take revenge, usually, when people are attacked it is the case in the sagas that they can fight back; however, this is not the case here. Kotkel and his family who performed the magic are stoned to death and one person who got away is drowned. Magic is perceived as such a terrible thing that people who are exercising it are like outlaws. In this case, the people who performed the magic, a family, were already some kind of outlaws, since Thord charged them with stealing and performing witchcraft. The use of magic by this family was thus already condemned in this saga since they were outlawed, and now Thorleik uses that same magic to try to kill Hrut even though he probably knew that the use of magic is condemned. Kotkel and his family were already considered to be unwelcome when they moved to Thorleik’s region. The general consensus of the community seems to be that it is acceptable not to have to fight with the people who exercise magic but just kill them, also because this episode concerns revenge over a murder. In the book *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe in the Middle Ages*, Catharina Raudvere states that in the *Grágás* and later law texts this kind of punishment for people who performed magic could be deemed an acceptable punishment.¹⁰⁸ When taking a look at the *Grágás*, however, no such punishment could be found. In the Christian law section of the *Grágás* it is said that anyone practising magic which has the

¹⁰⁶ Dennis, p. 141, part I.

¹⁰⁷ Byock, pp. 225-226.

¹⁰⁸ Raudvere, p. 160.

result that people or animals get killed will be fully outlawed.¹⁰⁹ There is, however, no mention of punishing them by drowning or stoning them to death. However, in the Bible, it is stated in Leviticus 20:27 that “a man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.”¹¹⁰ As this saga is perceived to have strong Christian influences, it is logical that this was taken from the Bible and that this form of punishment had no grounds in the laws of Iceland as we know them.

In this episode, a conflict is blown out of proportion because of two people have a different opinion of ethics. Hrut thinks he has done Thorleik a favour, while Thorleik is offended by his action. A clash of ethics, one might say. Throughout the saga it has been understood that the use of magic is wrong. Hrut takes revenge for what has been done to his family, something that is condoned in the *Grágás*. The way he takes revenge shows that people perceived magic as something that needed to be avoided at all costs. This episode concerns loyalty towards the community, since several families get involved in a conflict that was initially started by just a few men. The people of the different families try to protect themselves from people who are a threat not only to their family but also to their community.

In another episode of the *Vatnsdæla saga* a fishing agreement has been made.¹¹¹ An outsider has come to the region and is staying with his mother with Ingimund. The outsider, called Hrolleif and his mother were sent to this region, because they had caused trouble somewhere else. They were staying with Hrolleif’s kinsman Saemund, who is Ingimund’s foster-brother. When Hrolleif and his mother needed to leave Saemund’s region, Saemund asked Ingimund if they could stay with him. Ingimund agreed, even though he was reluctant to do it, but he stated that it was a generous thing to do and that is why he did it. Earlier in the saga it is already established that Hrolleif is a difficult character when it comes to interaction with other people and the narrator tells that here the relations with other people do not go well

¹⁰⁹ Dennis, p. 39, part I.

¹¹⁰ Leviticus 20. 27.

¹¹¹ This episode begins in chapter 22, p. 221 (Wawn), p. 56 (Einar Ól. Sveinsson , 1939).

either “Hrolleifr hafði venju sína; váru þat illar búsifjar við alla þá, er í nánd váru”¹¹², “Hrolleif carried on behaving just as usual; relations were bad with everyone in the vicinity.”¹¹³ He did not get along with the brothers, which probably resulted into the agreement to be made. As was established earlier, performing magic is perceived to be very wrong. Four of Ingimund’s sons and Hrolleif all wanted to fish at the same spot, but under the condition that Hrolleif will only fish when the brothers, or their men, are not present. Hrolleif does not keep his word about the agreement: he fishes whenever he wants to, because “því at hann virði meira vilja sinn ok ranglæti en hvat skilit var”¹¹⁴ “he set greater store by his own wishes and wickedness than by anything that had been agreed.”¹¹⁵ So, Hrolleif is someone that does not get along with other people and he is skilled in magic, which makes him someone to be avoided by other people. It is clear that here Hrolleif is only driven by greed; he does not think about anyone else but himself, even if it means that he might lose more than he gains, because a fight is easily provoked by acting the way he does. His actions are already being judged by the narrator and also by the men who oppose Hrolleif. When the men with whom the agreement was made see Hrolleif fishing, they tell him to go away. Hrolleif answers by calling them names and hurling rocks at them. The brothers want to kill him, but decide not to do so when their father Ingimund arrives, and so they retreat. But Hrolleif hurls a spear towards Ingimund which hits him in the chest. Ingimund is still alive when he returns home and sends a messenger to warn Hrolleif that his sons will most likely want to take revenge. At home, the brothers find their father dead and they decide to take revenge, which eventually leads to the death of Hrolleif.

It is not possible to know what ethics Hrolleif has, but it is interesting to see why the agreement about the fishing was made. Apparently the brothers and Hrolleif “þeir áttu veiði allir saman”¹¹⁶ “owned the fishing rights between them”¹¹⁷, and “en svá var mælt, at Hrolleifr

¹¹² Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 58.

¹¹³ Wawn, p. 221.

¹¹⁴ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 58.

¹¹⁵ Wawn, p. 221.

¹¹⁶ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 58.

¹¹⁷ Wawn, p. 221.

skyldi hafa veiði, ef eigi kæmi Ingimundarsynir til eða þeira menn”¹¹⁸, “it was laid down that Hrolleif was free to fish if neither Ingimund's sons nor their men were present”¹¹⁹ From these quotes, it seems that there was some sort of agreement made that was connected to a certain law. It also seems that someone other than the brothers and Hrolleif made this agreement, maybe as some sort of compromise for them not getting along. It is not clear who laid this down and when, only that it happened. In the *Grágás* a similar arrangement can be found, it is stated that:

“If there are boundary rivers, then both have the right to catch in them without division and draw their net to whichever side they like. They are not to allow anyone else to fish in the river. If one of them now thinks that his share falls short of the other’s, then he is to request a division from the man who owns the river jointly with him, to come in seven nights’ time, and he is to call five neighbours three nights or more before the time the river is to be divided. Neighbours nearest the river are to be called. They are to divide it by the week or in shorter periods: those who want to divide it in longer periods have the right to prevail. Even if no more than three neighbours come, their division is nevertheless lawful. That division between them is to hold through that summer, but then, if they wish, they have the right to allow other men to fish, each in the periods allotted to him.”¹²⁰

In the *Grágás* it seems that people divided the river during different time periods, somewhat similar to what happens here with Hrolleif, although it is not stated that the river is divided according to periods, he just cannot fish when Ingimund, or his sons or their men, are present. It looks like they derived their arrangement from the *Grágás*. The situation is of course not the same as in the *Grágás* because Hrolleif and his mother are staying with Ingimund, so there is no real boundary in the river because both Hrolleif and the brothers want to fish at the same

¹¹⁸ Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1939), p. 58.

¹¹⁹ Wawn, p. 221.

¹²⁰ Dennis, p. 140, part II.

part of the river. It was not necessary for Hrolleif to agree with the arrangement, but there would be repercussions if he would break it. This example shows that, when a group of people is involved in a conflict, an agreement can be initiated by one of them. This agreement might not achieve the intended effect, but at least an attempt has been made to resolve the conflict, even though some of the others do not agree. Here, one person, Hrolleif, puts his own desires in front of good interaction with the community he is living in. The other people in this scene, however, do think of a good solution to the problem, in order to try to make the community function without conflict. In the end, because of Hrolleif's inability to interact with other people in a normal way, even people who are good to him (Ingimund), the situation ends in a revenge killing. Ingimund's warning send to Hrolleif again shows how important family is, because he promised his foster-brother to take care of Hrolleif and his mother, and this warning is a last reminder of this promise. In this episode there is both the loyalty towards the community and a hint to loyalty towards family. But, because the main character around which this episode centres is absolutely unable to interact normally with people, loyalty towards the community, in protecting the community from Hrolleif, is rendered useless.

Part of an earlier episode could have been placed in this category: it is the episode where Thorstein goes after the villain Jokul, kills him and marries Jokul's sister on Jokul's request.¹²¹ Thorstein went to kill a villain, because his father had complained that the young men these days were not as the young men of his youth, they did not go on raids and did not gain any honour. Thorstein was provoked by this, which led him to killing Jokul. At the end of the episode, Thorstein has married Jokul's sister and has made the region a safer place. Before this, travellers were attacked by Jokul and none of the travellers who took the road where Jokul attacked ever came back. The people in the region complained about this, because Thorstein's father should solve a problem like this, because he is the chieftain of the region. Thorstein's father sends Thorstein in his place after provoking him. The episode could have been placed in this category, because Thorstein does not only stay loyal to his father and give

¹²¹ See the category about family loyalty.

him back his good name, but he also makes sure the community he is living in is safe and in that way he is also staying loyal to the community he is living in. But, because his father caused him to go after Jokul, which led to the killing of Jokul, this episode was placed in the category about staying loyal to one's family.

Another scene that could have been placed in this category is when Thorstein and Berg are having problems with each other. Because Thorstein is quite an important person in his community, everything he gets involved in could reflect on the situation in his community. That could have been a reason to place that scene in this category. But since the episode was mainly about their own values, the episode was placed in the category about being loyal to oneself.

Problems and conclusions

It was not always easy to put the scenes in the right category, as there were different problems that needed to be dealt with. The categories were made based on how the characters acted, but sometimes it was hard to figure out what exactly their motives were, which made it difficult to put them in the right category. Questions that were asked were: which of the characters is the most important when deciding in which category to place the episode? Are the characters acting out of selfishness or because they think their own morals and values are the most important? This resulted in that some scenes could perhaps have been placed in other categories.

In the category about family loyalty, one scene has been left out and put in the category about loyalty towards oneself due to interfering loyalties where Kjartan buys the land that Bolli and Gudrun wanted to have. The reason the scene was not put in the first category is because it seems that Gudrun is acting more out of vengeance than out of the need to protect her family. Of course, it is also very logical to say that she thinks of her family and

not about the bond she had with Kjartan, which causes her to want vengeance, but it seems that it is a bit more plausible to explain this as an act for revenge. She does not actually think about family honour, but rather uses the argument about family honour to get her way. Again, this is an interpretation based on the information given in the whole saga. The episode where Thorstein and Berg have a conflict, even though they did not fight over it, could maybe have been put in the last category about community as well. Because both Thorstein and Berg are powerful men, who have an important role in their communities are in a conflict, one could argue that this is an episode that concerns the community. But because nothing really big happens, there is no fight, no one dies and no one but Thorstein and Berg are involved. They seem to be in some kind of power play in which they do not include other people, because of this, the scene was not put in the final category. In the episode where Bolli asks Gudrun to marry him, it was very hard to distinguish what his motives were, which resulted in a closer look at Gudrun and here reasons to marry Bolli when putting this episode in a category. The episode in the *Vatnsdaela saga* where Thorstein goes into the woods to fight villains, his general action within the whole episode, up until the moment when he comes back home, is inspired or actually provoked by his father's words at the beginning of the episode. Even though he does something good for the community, which could have placed part of the episode in that category, the episode in general is about how loyal Thorstein stays to his father's words, although he was provoked into taking action. When Thorstein and his brothers divide their inheritance, the episode could be seen as a selfish act from Thorstein. He takes a lot of the possessions and his brothers object at first, but when he explains why he does it, they agree with his choice. His argument is valid enough to the brothers, which maybe means he stays loyal to his family and is not as selfish as he seems to be at first. Therefore, placing him in the category about family seems the right thing to do. Another scene that is very ambiguous is when a group of people have to share a fishing spot. One of them does not comply with the agreement that he can only fish when the others are not present. This person

is known for his obnoxious behaviour and here his behaviour is obviously very egocentric. Therefore, this scene was not put in the category about staying loyal to oneself, but rather in the category about staying loyal to the community. In terms of the decision where to put the episode, the focus in this scene is shifted from the egocentric behaviour of one person to the protective behaviour of the others. Whether a person is acting out of egocentric reasons or whether he has ulterior motives is something that comes up very often. The category 'loyalty towards oneself' is generally subject to this problem. In the end, though, it was always possible to see why the characters acted in a certain way.

Both in the *Laxdaela saga* and in the *Vatnsdaela saga* there were also several incidents that concerned murder or some other crime, which could not be classified easily. They mainly concerned two opposing groups, where one of the two behaved in a manner the other did not like, which resulted in one attacking the other. Often these situations came from a disliking of one of the two of the other. These incidents all seemed to come from a sense of protecting their (family's) honour. In that respect they could have been placed in the category 'loyalty towards one's family', but often it was unclear if it was their own honour they were protecting, their family's honour, or that they simply wanted to kill the person, because they thought him to be obnoxious. In that respect the situation could have been placed in the category 'loyalty towards the community'. But, as can be seen, there are too many options as to what sort of category these incidents could be placed in, and therefore I have opted to leave them out of the analysis completely, even though some of them could have been interesting, as there were just too many probabilities and too little certainties. Perhaps these shorter incidents would be interesting to get into in another research paper, because, if there are so many probabilities about them, is this then something that is so common to Icelandic culture that it does not need to be explained? Was it so known by the medieval Icelandic audience, while to the modern audience (or researcher) it is harder to understand? This might be something to investigate further in a different setting.

These problems; in which category to put certain episodes and what to do with the episodes that have hardly any ethical conduct, were found in both sagas. And the problems were not the only thing that was not similar in the two sagas. There is no significant difference in the way the conflicts are handled in the *Laxdaela saga* and the *Vatnsdaela saga*. The way characters handle conflict is in general the same, when one wants to look for a difference in ethics for the characters in general, it can not be said that the characters of the *Laxdaela saga* and the *Vatnsdaela saga* are that different. Of course, each saga has its own distinct ‘flavour’ or ‘colour’ as one might say, and they are completely different in content. But the problems and the way they handle conflict are generally the same. *Vatnsdaela saga* has fewer conflicts that have a significant impact on the saga, and a lot of smaller ones that were not significant to this research.

In the various categories, one can see that most episodes are placed in the category about loyalty towards family. But, it must be said that this loyalty is not always given that easily. The characters struggle at times with their decisions and are influenced by their own feelings and what is the right thing to do. Therefore, even though family is so important, the characters struggle as family loyalty sometimes limits their own feelings about what is right and wrong. These impulses are weaker than their feeling of duty towards family, in that sense the individual maybe knows his needs are less relevant than the ones of the family. The characters always need to think of the bigger picture that they are a part of and of which they have to take care of.

The individual’s ethics play thus an important part in these sagas. In the category about loyalty towards oneself, persons clearly also follow their own feelings, instead of listening to what the people around them think is right. The struggle of the individual to choose between what his or her family thinks is right and what they themselves think is right, is something that stands at the heart of these sagas. The individual sometimes makes an attempt to break free and follow his own ethics (for example Hoskuld), but due to

circumstances, he knows that that is not possible. Making the choice between loyalty towards oneself and loyalty towards family causes most friction within families and between characters. What is ethical to a person is subject to many different factors, some of these can not always easily be discerned from the saga or its context.

The category about loyalty towards the community is standing a bit on its own, for the situations that are causes one to choose to do the right thing for the good of the community are often less personal. When doing the right thing for the good of the community, people try to make situations work together to keep the community functioning.

Conclusion

Iceland, as a society that was fairly young, has brought forward one of the most unique kinds of literature of the Middle Ages. Icelandic society was rural, with no villages or towns and as can be seen from the sagas discussed here, people lived on farms.

The ethics of the characters in the sagas were often heavily influenced by what their family wanted from them. Family plays a very important part in these sagas and often the characters actions come from what is expected from them from their family. But, the biggest conflicts and struggle arise, when the characters go against their family's wishes, when they go against of what is expected from them. Then there comes a division between what seems ethical to their family and what seems ethical to the individual. In these sagas the individual stands often at the heart of the conflict. Hoskuld, who does not want to give up on his inheritance and Gudrun who divorces her husband just to be able to marry Thord. Since family is maybe the most important thing in Iceland, it is logical that when one has to decide to do the right thing, one relies on one's family. But the will of the individual is strong, as people seem to want to break free from the family ties that bind them. The importance of staying loyal to ones family is reflected in the way people stay loyal to their community. When people stay loyal to their community and do the right thing for their community, they often work together, they try to keep the community functioning. When people stay loyal to their family, or do things because their family thinks it is the right thing to do, this also benefits their family as a whole, it makes sure that their family as a group keeps functioning.

When one wants to look for a moral in the sagas, one maybe should not look for one that lies within the boundaries of religion, or what the narrator meant to learn the people by writing down these sagas. One maybe must look for what the moral was of Icelandic society, as these sagas reflect social structures of real life. The moral of Icelandic society is then to stick together with your family and your community, to work together and make sure that everyone is able to make a life for himself within a family and a community. As there was no

monarchy in Iceland, or any other system under which Iceland was ruled as one, people needed to depend on each other and by helping each other, the community stayed intact and the families as well. These family sagas are then perhaps those stories about the people who behave differently, or who want to behave differently from this moral. These people try to follow their 'inner' ethics, those ethics that are rejected by the general moral of Icelandic culture.

The reason that the Icelandic family sagas are so different from Arthurian literature or any other European literature of the Middle Ages is then not so strange. Literature from the European Middle Ages often contains examples of how people should behave and how they should live in a form that is quite different from how real life was in medieval Europe. The Icelandic family sagas however, seem to reflect real life of medieval Iceland quite well, saga and society are here so intermingled that the moral of society is not what is glorified in the sagas, but the people who rebel against this moral are. This might be the reason why it is so difficult for researchers who do not come from a background of Scandinavian medieval literature (such as myself) to understand why the characters in the sagas behave so irrationally and that the audience does not even seem to mind, but glorifies and praises them for who they are.

Bibliography

Primary literature

Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ed., ‘Laxdæla Saga’, in *Íslenzk Fornrit V. Bindi* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1934), pp. 1-229.

—— ‘Vatnsdæla Saga’, in *Íslenzk Fornrit V. Bindi* (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1939), pp. 1-131.

Dennis, Andrew, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, transl. and eds, *Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás* parts I and II (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1980-2000).

Kunz, Keneva, transl., ‘The Saga of the People of Laxardal’, in *The Sagas of Icelanders* ed. by Robert Kellogg, *World of the Sagas* (New York: the Penguin Group, 2001), pp. 270-422.

Wawn, Andrew, transl., ‘The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal’, in *The Sagas of Icelanders* ed. by Robert Kellogg, *World of the Sagas* (New York: the Penguin Group, 2001), pp. 185-270.

Secondary literature

Bredsdorff, Thomas, *Chaos & Love: the Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, transl. by John Tucker (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, Univ. of Copenhagen, 2001).

Byock, Jesse, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

Clover, Carol J., ‘Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)’, in *Old Norse-Icelandic*

Literature: A Critical Guide, ed. by Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 239-316.

Evans, Virginia M. 'The ethics of survival: a critical approach to the Icelandic family saga', *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 39 (1979), p.

Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and action in thirteenth-century Iceland*, (Odense University Press, 1998), The Viking Collection vol. 11, ed. by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and Gerd Wolfgang Weber.

Helgi Þorláksson, 'Historical Background: Iceland 870-1400', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 136-155.

Hermann Pálsson, 'Icelandic Sagas and Medieval Ethics', *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 7 (1974), pp. 61-76.

Kellogg, Robert, ed., 'Introduction', in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, World of the Sagas (New York: the Penguin Group, 2001), pp. xv-lv.

Lönnroth, Lars, 'Dreams in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies*, vol. 74 (2002), pp. 455-465.

Madelung, A. Margeret A., *The Laxdæla Saga: its Structural Patterns* (Chapel Hill: the University of North California Press, 1972).

Örnólfur Thorsson, ed., *The Sagas of Icelanders*, World of the Sagas (New York: the Penguin

Group, 2001).

Raudvera, Catharina, Karen Jolly and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Middle Ages* (London: The Athlone Press, 2002), *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe* vol. 3, ed. by Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark.

Rowe, Elizabeth Ashman and Joseph Harris, 'Short Prose Narrative (*þátttr*)', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 462-479.

Taylor, Arnold R., 'Laxdaela saga and author involvement in the Icelandic Sagas', *Leeds studies in English*, vol. 7 (1973), pp. 13-21.

Theodore M. Ándersson, *The Icelandic Family Sagas: an Analytical Reading* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967).

Toorn, M.C. van den, *Ethics and Moral in Icelandic Saga Literature* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1955).

Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. by Rory McTurk (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 101-119.

Front cover picture: Map of the Laxardal district, from the translation of *Laxdaela saga* by Press, Muriel A.C., *Laxdaela saga* (London: J.M. Dent and Co., 1899).