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## VALOUR AND BALANCE: PREREQUISITES OF A HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN THE FAMILY SAGAS

The thesis that social positions in a community are dependent on gender, has recently been greatly influenced by the theory of “hegemonic masculinity” formulated by the Australian sociologist Reawyn Connel<sup>1</sup>. According to her, multiple types of masculinities co-exist in every society and each of them is associated with different positions of power. Her claim derives from the concept that gender is constructed in people’s minds and thus is not immutable but constantly changing. It is therefore practised in order to maintain or alter social positions. As Connel argues, one of these practices is the notion of hegemony, used in societies to legitimize the dominant form of masculinity – to which few men are able or permitted to aspire – and which serves to marginalise or subordinate other masculinities as well as, of course, femininities<sup>2</sup>.

The focus in this study will be on a more ancient past, namely on medieval Iceland. Even then hegemonic masculinity was discernible and, as it will be argued, the idea of a perfect and ruling man had to meet two requirements: valiant behaviour and well-balanced conduct in everyday conflicts. Neither of the aforementioned qualities were sufficient on their own to acquire the title of an “ideal man”, since being merely strong and bold could easily result in too much aggressiveness condemned by the community. On the other hand, being cool-headed and unwilling to fight was often regarded as cowardice.

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<sup>1</sup> *Masculinities*, II, ed. by R. Connel, Cambridge 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

A special way to achieve the ideal was the phenomenon which I labelled “fusion”, where two persons, each of them owning only one of the attributes, unite to construct the hegemonic masculine ideal. This will be illustrated through two famous family sagas, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, where pairs like Snorri goði and Styr as well as Njáll and Gunnarr cooperate to achieve social domination.

This paper aims to demonstrate the strong connection between masculinity and social status, and sheds light on how different layers of masculinity could be applied in thirteenth-century Iceland. The investigation is based on the *Íslendingasögur*, the sagas of Icelanders or family sagas, a literary corpus whose plot usually takes place in the ninth–eleventh centuries, but was written down at least two centuries later. Hence, it is likely that the sources mostly reflect contemporary rather than earlier beliefs concerning hegemony and masculinity.

## Social domination and masculinity

*Eigi eru þeir forystulausir, er ú ert fyrirmaðr, sakar áræðis ok karlmennsku* (“With you at their head, no one will be without leadership, because of your daring and manliness”)<sup>3</sup> – says Jökull to his brother Þorsteinn in *Vatnsdæla saga*, explicitly linking leadership with manliness. The correlation of masculinity and power is an old one in gender studies and is also discernible in the Old Norse corpus<sup>4</sup>.

The strong link between masculinity and social rule is attested also in the beginning of *Vatnsdæla saga*, where the chieftain Ketill expounds to his son Þorsteinn on the ideal conduct of a young man. In his parables, the chieftain draws on precedents to Þorsteinn for the manly behaviour by referring to earls and kings as prominent examples to follow<sup>5</sup>.

This close connection between manliness and social domination was well illustrated by Carol Clover, who showed that exceptional women could all reach a respected place in society (even leader roles) if they acquired manly features<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit VIII, Reykjavík 1939, p. 11; *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, [in:] *The Sagas of Icelanders. A Selection*, ed. by Örnólfur Thorsson, New York 2001, p. 193.

<sup>4</sup> B. Bandlien, *Man or Monster? Negotiations of Masculinity in Old Norse Society*, Oslo 2005, p. 2; Rulers were hailed as the best of warriors in skaldic poetry: R. Malmros, *Den hedenske fyrstedigtungs samfundssyn*, “Historisk Tidskrift” 99:2 (1999), pp. 353–355.

<sup>5</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> C. Clover, *Maiden Warriors and Other Sons*, “The Journal of English and Germanic Philology” 85:1 (1986), pp. 35–49; Idem: *Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe*, “Speculum”, 68:2 (1993), pp. 363–387. See also L. Normann, *Woman or Warrior? Construction of Gender in Old Norse Myth*, [in:] *Old Norse Myths, Literature and Society: Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Saga Conference*, ed. by M. Clunies Ross, G. Barnes, 2000, pp. 375–385.

Women challenged the masculinity of men when they intended to rebel against social oppression<sup>7</sup>. In *Laxdæla saga*, for instance, Guðrún's attempt to steal the sword of her former lover Kjartan and Auðr's attack on her husband's sword hand are considered to be symbolic castrations that caused serious wounds to the social status of the two men<sup>8</sup>. Clover's "one-gender model" argues that not only women could rise by being masculine, but men could also fall by being feminine; if someone was not manly enough, he could easily end up at the bottom of the social chain.

In the saga literature, the introduction of a character often helps us to determine the degree of his manliness<sup>9</sup>. The physical appearance and the internal attributes of a person have a significant impact on the reader's judgement on the character and often forebode his fate<sup>10</sup>. Thus, when we read about a person we already have some preconceptions of what kind of a person he is or how he is going to end up in the story. The typical hegemonic masculine character is introduced to us in the sagas by mentioning two essential qualities: valour and balance.

*Hrútr var vænn maðr; mikill og sterkr, vígr vel ok hógværr í skapi, manna vitrastr, harðráðr við óvini sína, en tillagagóðr inna stærri mála*<sup>11</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

*"Hrut was a handsome man; he was tall, strong, and skilled in arms, even-tempered and very shrewd, ruthless with his enemies and always reliable in matters of importance"*<sup>12</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

The two requirements of an ideal man – valour and balance – are complex categories. The former one is quite obvious and expected in a Viking Age community and also in the later medieval period when the sagas were written, namely to be physically strong (in Hrútr's case: *mikill og sterkr*), courageous and unwilling to back up from a fight (*harðráðr við óvini sína*). The latter, however, is a more complicated category, comprised of a certain wisdom (*manna vitrastr*) and even-tempered conduct in everyday conflicts (*hógværr í skapi*). A valiant and a balanced person is usually typified by the following adjectives:

Valour: *mikill, sterkr, vígr vel, harðráðr, áræði, karlmennska, framgjarn, harðfengr*

<sup>7</sup> A. Ney, *Drottningar och sköldmör: gränsöverskridande kvinnor i medeltida myt och verklighet ca. 400–1400*, Heidemora 2004, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> N. Dolen, *Å fare som ein mann – om ære og kjønn i Laxdæla saga*, [in:] *Herzort Island: Aufsätze zur isländischen Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte: zum 65. Geburtstag von Gert Krauzer*, ed. by T. Seiler, Köln. 2005. pp. 27–41.

<sup>9</sup> L. Lönnroth, *Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas*, "Scandinavian Studies" 42:2 (1970), pp. 157–189.

<sup>10</sup> L. Lönnroth, *Kroppen som själens spegel – ett motiv i de isländska sagorna*, "Lychnos" (1963–1964), pp. 24–61.

<sup>11</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk Fornrit XII, Reykjavík 1954, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Njal's saga*, transl. by Magnus Magnusson, Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Books 1960, p. 39.

Balance: *hógværr, vitr, tillagagóðr, forspár, langrækr, heilráðr*<sup>13</sup>.

Persons with both of these attributes usually turn out to be successful, well-respected and popular men, often occupying high social positions<sup>14</sup>. Other men, however, who lack one of these qualities, usually become troublemakers or are perceived as cowards. They are treated as unmanly and occupy socially inferior positions<sup>15</sup>.

Two pioneering works have to be mentioned when concerning the ideals of medieval Icelandic literature: Theodore M. Andersson's article, the "Displacement of the Heroic Ideals in the Family Sagas" and Lars Lönnroth's theory of the "Noble Heathen". Both scholars argued that the Christian ethics at the time of saga writing influenced the morals, and that the social ideal in this literature was not heroic but peaceful<sup>16</sup>. Although this study does not intend to glorify heroism in the sagas, Andersson's and Lönnroth's views will be revisited. What is more, despite the fact that this will not challenge the viewpoint that someone can be a positive character without being valiant, the fact that it restrains the character's chances to become a hegemonic masculine person will be pointed out in selected episodes. Although this mindset might not dominate throughout the whole corpus of the *Íslendingasögur*, I believe the examples below demonstrate the importance of physical force in the saga world and its relation to manliness.

## Valour but no Balance

One of the typical instances when a person has physical powers but lacks "balance" is the case of berserks – the ferocious, unbeatable warriors who, acting as unwelcome suitors, challenged peaceful farmers to duels for their property and women. These exceedingly aggressive, "over-masculine" figures were a social menace to ordinary men<sup>17</sup>. Despite their often hypermasculine physicality, their overbearing behaviour resulted in social contempt.

In *Eyrbyggja saga*, two berserks Halli and Leiknir are handed over almost like objects by earl Hákon to his respected retainer Vermundr. Halli and Leiknir are obviously very masculine figures: *Deir váru menn miklu meiri ok sterkari en*

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<sup>13</sup> For a broader term list see: Jón Vidar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Odense 1999, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Individual and Social Values in Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, "Scandinavian Studies" 60:2 (1988), pp. 260–263.

<sup>15</sup> Individual traits of a character are thus never separated from the social context. Vilhjálmur Árnason, *An Ethos in Transformation: Conflicting Values in the Sagas*, "Gripla" 20 (2009), pp. 217–240.

<sup>16</sup> T.M. Andersson, *The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas*, "Speculum" 45:4 (1970), pp. 575–593; L. Lönnroth, *The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas*, "Scandinavian Studies" 41:1 (1969), pp. 1–29.

<sup>17</sup> B. Blaney, *Berserkr*, [in:] *Medieval Scandinavia. An Encyclopedia*, ed by. P. Pulsiano, K. Wolf, New York–London 1993, pp. 37–38.

*í þann tíma fengisk þeira jafningjar í Nóregi* (“They were men of much greater size and strength than any other men in Norway”)<sup>18</sup>. Still, they are treated like objects, changing masters twice throughout the course of the saga and it seems that they do not have much to say with regard to the choice of the owner they are given to. They address their harsh treatment later on, explicitly saying: *kalla Vermund eigi eiga at selja sik né gefa sem ánauðga menn*<sup>19</sup> (“that Vermund had no right to sell them or give them away like slaves”). This passage suggests that, despite their manly appearance and physical prowess, overbearing troublemakers, like the berserks, were socially inferior to other men. Too much “valour” was a disadvantage not only in the physical but also in the sexual sense. In a notable scene of *Njáls saga*, Hrútr cannot enjoy his wife Unnr as a result of the curse of his previous lover Queen Gunnhildr: his penis grows so large that he is not able to penetrate Unnr<sup>20</sup>.

Later on, one of the berserk brothers Halli asks for the hand of Ásdís, the daughter of their current master Styrr<sup>21</sup>. In one of her articles, Judy Quinn asserts that Ásdís’ description in her fascinating attire and her queen-like behaviour – she does not even answer to the brothers when they address her – makes it clear that this would not be a marriage between equals<sup>22</sup>. The marriage proposal, submitted by Halli, is thus rejected due to the discrepancy in social status between him and Ásdís, namely that a berserk will never be a match for a prosperous farmer’s daughter. Although belonging to a different saga (sub-)genre, *Sörla saga sterka* reflects a similar notion when King Haraldr refuses to give his daughter in marriage to *svá leiðu tröllli ok mögnuðum berserk* (“such a loathsome troll and bewitched berserk”)<sup>23</sup>. Here the word *berserk* is synonymous with troll, linking it with bestiality, which was always socially condemned<sup>24</sup>. Berserks often do not even try to marry a woman, but to take her by force, and their attempts to rape farmers’ daughters in general are challenges by the marginal against the settled<sup>25</sup>. That these monstrous troublemakers were handled as socially inferior could not be affirmed better than

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<sup>18</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Matthías Þórðarson, Íslenzk fornrit IV, Reykjavík 1935, p. 61; *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, [in:] *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Including 49 Tales*, ed. by Viðar Hreinsson, Leifur Eiríksson Publishing 1997, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 64; *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 159.

<sup>20</sup> U. Dronke, *The Role of Sexual Themes in Njáls saga*, Viking Society for Northern Research, London 1981, pp. 1–31; C. Phelpstead, *Size Matters: Penile Problems in Sagas of Icelanders*, “Exemplaria” 19:3 (2007), pp. 420–437.

<sup>21</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 70–75.

<sup>22</sup> J. Quinn, *Women in Old Norse Poetry and Sagas*, [in:] *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*. ed. by R. McTurk., Oxford, 2005, pp. 518–535.

<sup>23</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *The Trollish Acts of Þorgrímur the Witch: The Meanings of Troll and Ergi in Medieval Iceland*, “Saga-Book” 32 (2008), p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> B. Bandlien, *Man or Monster...*, pp. 125–127.

<sup>25</sup> R.M. Karras, *Servitude and Sexuality in Medieval Iceland*, [in:] *From Sagas to Society. Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland*, ed. by Gísli Pálsson, Wiltshire 1992, p. 299.

by the relevant sections of the medieval Icelandic law book the *Grágás* (1117–18), which punishes *berserkrangr* (“berserk frenzy”) with outlawry<sup>26</sup>.

Not only berserks but other characters are also seen as socially inferior due to their hypertrophic masculinity; one good example is that of Grettir Ásmundarson the Strong. Grettir is said to have been the strongest man in Icelandic history and ends up as an outlaw due to his killings, thefts and other unsocial acts he has committed on the island<sup>27</sup>. The same is true for other socially overbearing men. After examining *Gunnlaugs saga*, Robert Cook observes that although Gunnlaugr is the protagonist of the saga and we are affected by his death, he is actually weak in character<sup>28</sup>. The same is claimed by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen saying “that Gunnlaugr lacks some of the qualities necessary for a chieftain, among them popularity”<sup>29</sup>. Although both Grettir and Gunnlaugr are examples of strong and courageous, if somewhat unbalanced, persons they are also positive characters in the eyes of the reader. Even an “over-masculine” man could therefore appear in a favourable light, although this could hardly be synonymous with being a hegemonic man. It is also true for the reverse: if someone is a peaceful and balanced person, it does not result in his being perceived as a social ideal.

### Balance but no Valour

Berserks had “valour”, in fact too much of it, which often resulted in their social condemnation. Too much aggressiveness was therefore a disadvantage for a man but the same could also be said for those who were not aggressive enough. Even Gunnarr, one of the main protagonists in *Njáls saga*, wonders whether his remorse – which he feels after a huge massacre he inflicted – is a sign of unmanliness:

*Hvat ek veit, segir Gunnarr, hvárt ek mun því óvaskari maðr en aðrir menn sem mér þykkir meira fyrir en öðrum mönnum at vega menn*<sup>30</sup>.

“But I wish I knew, said Gunnar, whether I am any the less manly than other men, for being so much more reluctant to kill than other man are”<sup>31</sup>.

The second type of people who were held on a liminal gender and social position, were those peacemakers, whom Andersson and Lönnroth regarded as the social ideals of the family sagas. Without being courageous and valiant, however,

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<sup>26</sup> V. Finsen, *Grágás I. Islændernes Lovbog i Fristatens Tid. Udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, Copenhagen 1852, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Poilvez in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> R. Cook, *Character of Gunnlaug-Serpent Tongue*, “Scandinavian Studies” 43:1 (1971), pp. 1–21.

<sup>29</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Individual and Social...*, p. 249.

<sup>30</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> *Njal's saga*, p. 135.

it was hard to achieve a respected place in society<sup>32</sup>. Even the ideal peacemakers like Ingimundr, who is a typical “noble heathen” according to Lönnroth, are still up for fighting. The saga, moreover, speaks of him as a typical hegemonic masculine person:

*Öllum þótti mikils um Ingimund vert, bæði um háttu hans ok yfirbragð; hann var kænn við alla leika ok at allri atgørvi vel færr ok óágjarn við sér minni men, en harðfengr ok framgjarn við sína óvini*<sup>33</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

“Everyone thought a great deal of Ingimund, both his manner and appearance. He was talented in all games and very able in every accomplishment and not at all aggressive towards lesser men, but tough and combative with his enemies”<sup>34</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

Valour was indeed an essential quality for a top-notch man and especially for a chieftain, who claimed to be a masculine ideal. It is quite frequent in the sagas that someone appears in a positive light as a peacemaker, nevertheless it does not necessarily mean that he is an ideal type of man, and especially not that he is fit for the leadership of a community.

One of these examples is Þórarinn from *Eyrbyggja saga*, a figure who has strength, though he does not make use of it. We read about him in the saga that he was *vel stilltr hversdagliga; hann var kallaðr mannasættir* (“self-composed and he had a reputation as a peace-maker”)<sup>35</sup>. This attitude, however, leads to our questioning of his manliness:

*Svá var hann maðr óhlutdeilinn, at óvinir hans mæltu, at hann hefði eigi síðr kvenna skap en karla*<sup>36</sup>.

“He was so impartial that his enemies said that his disposition was as much like a woman’s as a man’s”<sup>37</sup>.

Þórarinn is not just simply óhlutdeilinn but *svá óhlutdeilinn*, implying that his impartiality is exaggerated. As in the case of the “over-masculine” attitude of the berserks, the “overbalanced” conduct of Þórarinn is similarly intolerable in the eyes of men. However, he is perceived unmanly not only due to his excessiveness in virtues but also because of his lack of valour. This becomes apparent when he finally avenges an insult with physical force and when his kinsmen ask him whether the insulters *Hvárt vissu þeir nú, hvárt þú vart karlmaðr eða kona?*

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<sup>32</sup> See also: R. Cook, *Heroes and Heroism in Njáls saga*, [in:] *Greppaminni*, ed. by Margrét Eggertsdóttir et al., Reykjavík 2009, pp. 71–90.

<sup>33</sup> *Vatnsdæla saga*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> *The Saga of the People of Vatnsdal*, p. 199.

<sup>35</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 27; *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*.

<sup>37</sup> *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 142.

(“have found out whether he is a man or a woman”)?<sup>38</sup> The nature of the question indicates that Þórarinn was once perceived on a liminal phase between men and women before the actions (a man with a behaviour of a woman) and only after overcoming his cowardice can he earn his respected place in society.

Backing up from a fight was often considered to be a social disgrace, particularly with regard to the leaders. Mörðr gígja in *Njáls saga* was *ríkr höfðingi* (“a powerful chieftain”) and *Mála fylgumaðr mikill ok svá mikill lögmaðr; at engir þóttu lögligir dómar dæmðir, nema hann væri við* (“very experienced lawyer – so skilful, indeed, that no judgement was held to be valid unless he had taken part in it”)<sup>39</sup>. Although he is a leader and appears to have a balanced type of character, his social status suffers a serious blow at the *Alþingi* after he refuses to fight in a duel which he is challenged to by another chieftain Hrútr.

*Þá kvað Mörðr þat upp, at han mundi eigi berjask við Hrút; þá varð óp mikit at lögbergi ok óhljóð, ok hafði Mörðr af ina mestu svívirðing<sup>40</sup>.*

“So Mord announced that he would not fight with Hrut. There was a great shout of derision at the Law Rock, and Mord earned nothing but ignominy from this”<sup>41</sup>.

The instances of Þórarinn and Mörðr show that to be socially dominant or respected, one’s conduct had to be consistent with the expectations of “manly behaviour”, which concerns both valour and balance. Excessive peacefulness or withdrawal from a violent situation could result in being dishonoured. The disdain of the community towards this unmanly conduct often manifested itself in personal insults (Þórarinn), or in public humiliation (Mörðr).

Not all of the family sagas of course share the completely same notion of manliness<sup>42</sup>, and thus regarding these examples as the representative view of the society which produced it would be problematic. However, the other connected evidence might strengthen the point expounded above. Passivity in sexual life, for instance, was blameworthy too; in male same-sex intercourse, it was always the passive partner who suffered harsh condemnation, while being the penetrator was less of a dishonour<sup>43</sup>. Suffering from oppression either in sexual or social life was thus a form of effeminacy that a real man could not afford.

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<sup>38</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 43; *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 5; *Njal’s saga*, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> *Njal’s saga*, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance: Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics in Njáls saga*, “Viator” 38 (2007), pp. 191–215.

<sup>43</sup> P. Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man: Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, transl. by J. Turville-Petre, Odense 1983; S. Fölke, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes*, Viking Society for Northern Research, London 1974, pp. 1–20; K.E. Gade, *Homosexuality and Rape of Males in Old Norse Law and Literature*, “Scandinavian Studies” 58 (1986), pp. 124–141; J. Jochens, *Old Norse Sexuality: Men, Women, and Beasts*, [in:] *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*. ed. by V.L. Bullough, J.A. Brundage, New York–London 1996, pp. 369–400.



## Fusion

There were, naturally, people who were not suited for physical combat either due to their age, or to their body build. Their counterparts, that is the people who had less affinity for wisdom, were in the same boat. For both types, it was hard to reach the top layers of society with regard to their status. Nevertheless, as we will see in what follows, this did not mean that people possessing only one of the preferable attributes of a “real man” were completely excluded from leadership. If a person owned only one of the qualities, he could still turn to a phenomenon, which I refer to as “fusion”; meaning that in order to construct the hegemonic masculine ideal, he unites himself with a man who owns the opposite attribute. Two famous family sagas, *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Brennu-Njáls saga*, are good examples here, where pairs like Snorri goði and Styrr, as well as Njáll and Gunnarr, cooperate to achieve social domination. Snorri the goði from *Eyrbyggja saga* lacks physical force while Gunnarr in *Njáls saga* ought to have more wisdom and self-control. Each of them is in need of the other component: Snorri needs valour, while Gunnarr lacks balance.

Snorri is the prominent character of *Eyrbyggja saga* who, thanks to his intellectual skills, slowly takes over the whole territory of Snæfellsnes and becomes the dominant figure in power. Acquiring leadership, however, is a slow process for him with many obstacles where he has to prove himself. This is sometimes quite hard as his original qualities are not sufficient to make him a chieftain and help him to maintain that position. When he is introduced in the saga, we are immediately informed about his problems:

*Snorri var meðalmaðr á hæð ok heldr grannligr...hann var hógværr hversdagliga; fann lítt á honum, hvárt honum þótti vel eða illa; hann var vitr maðr ok forspár um marga hluti, langrækr ok heiptúðigr, heilráðr vinum sínum, en óvinir hans þóttusk heldr kulða af kenna ráðum hans...hann gerðisk þá höfðingi mikill, en ríki hans var mjök öfundsamt, því at þeir váru margir, er eigi þóttusk til minna um komnir fyrir ættar sakar, en áttu meira undir sér fyrir afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi<sup>44</sup>. [Emphasis mine]*

*“Snorri was a man of medium height but rather thin...He was usually an even-tempered man, and did not readily show his likes and dislikes. Snorri was a wise man and had foresight about many things, a long memory and a predisposition to vengeance. He gave his friends good counsel, but his enemies felt the chill of his strategies...He became a prominent chieftain but his power also occasioned envy since there were many who believed that their lineage gave them no lesser claim to leadership than his, and rather more in terms of strength of their following and their proven valour”<sup>45</sup>. [Emphasis mine]*

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<sup>44</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>45</sup> *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, pp. 141–142.

As we read in the saga, Snorri is a very balanced person (*hógværr, vitr, forspár, langrækr, heilráðr*), but he has a shortage of valiant attributes; he is neither strong, nor brave, nor even a good fighter. He is only of medium height (*meðal-maðr*), slim (*grannligr*), and his enemies fear only his strategic skills (*kulða af kenna ráðum hans*), not his physical strength. Snorri's position occasions envy since, due to their greater strength and proven valour, many men think of themselves as being more suitable for leadership than him.

Snorri, being a good strategist, recognizes his disadvantages and, to stabilize his power, allies himself with Styrr, a respected warrior of the district, through a marriage between the two families. According to the saga,

*Var þat mál manna, at hvárrtveggja þótti vaxa af þessum tengðum; var Snorri goði ráðagörðarmaðr meiri ok vitrari, en Styrr atgöngumeiri*<sup>46</sup>.

“Everyone thought that both men's prestige was increased through this liaison. Snorri the goði was a better strategist and smarter, but Styrr was more aggressive”<sup>47</sup>.

In the power struggles of the district, their alliance works well and that this is not a simple alliance but something more becomes apparent at a later feast. Here was *Var þar talat um mannjöfnuð, hverr þar var væri göfgastr maðr í sveit eða mestr höfðingi* (“a lot of talk about who the most eminent man or the greatest chieftain in the district was”)<sup>48</sup>.

The fact that the text uses *göfgastr maðr* and *mestr höfðingi* as synonyms is in itself interesting and confirms a close connection between masculinity and social status. Different opinions of the feast participants, however, are even more notable.

*Urðu menn þar eigi á eitt sáttir, sem optast er, ef um mannjöfnuð er talat; váru þeir flestir, at Snorri goði þótti göfgastr maðr, en sumir nefndu til Arnkel; þeir váru enn sumir; er nefndu til Styrr*<sup>49</sup>.

“People were by no means on one opinion of this, as is often the way when there is a talk of comparing men. Most of them thought that Snorri the goði was the most eminent man, but some went for Arnkel. A few even named Styrr”<sup>50</sup>.

Snorri's personality and attributes have been already addressed and it is evident that he is one of the possible candidates for the recognition. That only a few people named Styrr as the most hegemonic of the men of the district is not surprising, as aggressiveness is less valued than mental qualities in the saga literature<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 165.

<sup>48</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 98; *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 176.

<sup>49</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 176.

<sup>51</sup> Jón Vidar Sigurðsson, *Chieftains and Power...*, pp. 86–87; Since Icelandic society was more peaceful than contemporary Norway or the Orkney Islands and leaders rarely engaged in

However, it is not an underestimated attribute, as it at least qualifies Styrr for the “competition”.

Arnkell, on the other hand, is a hegemonic masculine man with all the features that could be required, as we find out about him in one of the earlier passages:

*Hann [Arnkell] var mestr ok sterkastr, lagamaðr mikill ok forvitri. Hann var góðr drengur ok umfram alla menn aðra þar í sveit at vinsældum ok harðfengi*<sup>52</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

*“He [Arnkell] was the biggest and strongest of men, a knowledgeable lawman and very clever. He was a man of sound character and surpassed other men in that part of the country in both popularity and valour”*<sup>53</sup>. [Emphasis mine]

The situation is intriguing. We have two people (Snorri and Styrr), each of them excellent in his own respect, yet neither of them possesses both features: valour and balance. On the other hand, we have a chieftain (Arnkell) who is outstanding in both matters, surpassing any other man in the whole country. In spite of this, the result is by no means evident. One of the speakers at the feast, Þorleifr kimbi, says that the comparison should not be made between Snorri, Styrr and Arnkell, but only between Arnkell and the other two, since *Þar sé sem einn maðr; er þeir eru Snorri goði ok Styrr; fyrir tengða sakar* (“Snorri and Styrr count as one man because of their kinship”)<sup>54</sup>. The alliance of Snorri and Styrr is a particularly close one, perceived as a fusion of their personal qualities. This fusion was a special way to compete for hegemony, and the chieftains who were united in this way could be just as successful as the other, very masculine men. Andersson lists Snorri among the social ideals due to his diplomatic skills, but does not seem to acknowledge Styrr’s role in Snorri’s success<sup>55</sup>.

The pattern is similar in *Njáls saga*, where Gunnarr, a fighter of legendary status, always has to rely on the support of Njáll, the wise and even-tempered lawyer. When they first appear, both Gunnarr and Njáll seem to be very trusted, skilled and popular people. However, their differences are very evidently stressed. This is what we read about Gunnarr:

*Hann var mikill maðr vexti og sterkr; manna bezt vígr; hann hjó báðum höndum og skaut, ef hann vildi, ok hann vá svá skjótt með sverði, at þrjú þóttu á lopti at sjá. Hann*

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battle, chieftains’ physical power was less important. Jón Vidar Sigurðsson, *Kings, Earls and Chieftains. Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland c. 900–1300*, [in:] *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, ed. by G. Steinsland et al., Brill 2011, p. 79.

<sup>52</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 20.

<sup>53</sup> *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 139.

<sup>54</sup> *Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 99. *The Saga of the People of Eyri*, p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> Andersson, *The Displacement...*, pp. 581–582; Jón Vidar Sigurðsson also states that “Snorri... used every possible means to achieve power domination, including killing chieftains”. Jón Vidar Sigurðsson: *Chieftains and Power...*, p. 88.

*skaut manna bezt af boga og hæfði allt þat, er hann skaut til; hann hljóp meir en hæð sína með öllum herklæðum, ok eigi skemmra aptr en fram fyrir sik; hann var syndur sem selr; ok eigi var sá leikr at nökkurr þyrfti við hann at keppa ok hefir svá verit sagt, at engi væri hans jafningi...Manna kurteisast var hann, harðgörr í öllu, fémildr ok stilltr vel, vinfastr ok vinavandr<sup>56</sup>.*

“He was tall, a powerful man, outstandingly skilful with arms. He could strike or throw with either hand, and his sword-strokes were so fast that he seemed to be brandishing three swords at once. He was excellent at archery, and his arrows never missed their mark. He could jump more than his own height in full armour, and just as far backwards as forwards. He could swim like a seal. There was no sport at which anyone could even attempt to compete with him. It has been said that there has never been his equal...He was extremely well-bred, fearless, generous, and even-tempered, faithful to his friends but careful in his choice of them”<sup>57</sup>.

In contrast, Njáll’s description emphasizes other qualities:

*Hann var vel auðigr at fé ok vænn at álitu, en sá hlutr var á ráði hans, at honum óx eigi skegg. Hann var lögmaðr svá mikill, at engi fannsk hans jafningi, vitr var hann ok forspár; heilráðr ok góðgjarn, ok varð all at ráði, þat er hann réð mönnum, hógværr ok dreglyndr; langsynn ok langminnigr; hann leysti hvers manns vandræði, er á hans fund kom<sup>58</sup>.*

“Njal was wealthy and handsome, but he had one peculiarity: He could not grow a beard. He was so skilled in law that no one was considered his equal. He was a wise and prescient man. His advice was sound and benevolent, and always turned out well for those who followed it. He was a gentle man of great integrity; he remembered the past and discerned the future, and solved problems of any man who came to him for help”<sup>59</sup>.

It is apparent from the comparison that Gunnarr has outstanding physical skills while Njáll excels in mental ones. Njáll is mocked several times throughout the course of the saga because of his unmanliness. His lack of eagerness to fight is apparent as we never see him with any weapons, with the sole exception of an axe, which he bears at an old age and which is, nonetheless, more likely to be used to chop wood than to harm people<sup>60</sup>. On the other hand, Gunnarr is a valiant man and a prominent leader. Still, being short of the necessary wisdom, he is not able to maintain his social position of a leader and gets into dangerous situations. In one such instance he intermeddles in a legal case that he has nothing to do with, and ignores Njáll’s advice to get himself escorted everywhere by Njáll’s

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<sup>56</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 53.

<sup>57</sup> *Njal’s saga*, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 57.

<sup>59</sup> *Njal’s saga*, p. 74.

<sup>60</sup> Armann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics...*, p. 201.

sons for protection<sup>61</sup>. Gunnarr almost dies in an ambush as a consequence of his failures. The other instance for the socially unbalanced behaviour of Gunnarr is when he occupies a corn-field illegally, and thus becomes outlawed for his overbearing conduct<sup>62</sup>.

However, when Gunnarr is allied with Njáll and follows his instructions, no one can stand against them. They cooperate in six different scenes and every time they overcome their opponents. In each case they combine their skills: Njáll ex-cogitates a plan, in which Gunnarr's physical power plays a central role. This may be seen in the following passages.

### 1. *Recovering Unnr's dowry from Hrútr*

For the recovery of Unnr's dowry, Njáll's plan is to use Gunnarr's strength at the assembly to avoid physical confrontation with Hrútr and his company. Gunnarr's physical power serves as insurance to deter Hrútr and Höskuldr from the application of violence at the assembly: *þeir Hrútr ætlat at veita honum atgöngu, en treystusk eigi* ("Hrut and Hoskuld intended to use force against him, but they mistrusted their strength"<sup>63</sup>). Afterwards, Gunnarr challenges Hrútr to a duel, which the latter naturally rejects, letting Njáll and Gunnarr win the lawsuit.

### 2. *The lawsuit against Otkell*

Gunnarr asks for Njáll's help in a lawsuit against Otkell. Njáll gives a good counsel, suggesting that Gunnarr should see Hrútr (who is now their ally), and so the two build a strategy together. Hrútr's plan is based on Gunnarr's physical strength, namely he wants to challenge Otkell's patron, Gizurr hvíti Teitsson to a duel<sup>64</sup>. Hrútr says to Gunnarr that their *Höfum vér nú lið svá mikit allir saman, at þú mátt fram koma sliku sem þú vill* ("combined force is now so strong that we [viz. Hrútr and Gunnar] can accomplish whatever we want to do"<sup>65</sup>). Njáll's role in this episode is to point out that Hrútr will be of use to them. This time, the cleverness of Hrútr and the power of Gunnarr work as a fusion.

### 3. *The lawsuit against Gizurr hvíti and Geirr*

Njáll and Gunnarr team up together in a lawsuit against Gizurr hvíti and Geirr concerning the killing of Otkell. Njáll here restrains Gunnarr from making a harsh step – pronouncing outlawry against Geirr – saying that *Þetta mun nú verða mjök með kappi deilt* ("it would only exacerbate the dispute"<sup>66</sup>). Finally, people abide to

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<sup>61</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 152–153.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 166–181.

<sup>63</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 66; *Njal's saga*, p. 81.

<sup>64</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, pp. 128–130.

<sup>65</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 131; *Njal's saga*, p. 129.

<sup>66</sup> *Njal's saga*, pp. 138–139; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 144.

Njáll's advice and the suit ends with a reasonable arbitration. The emphasis here is on the cooperation: the valiant Gunnarr would fall into the over-aggressive, that is to say, "over-masculine" category without the assistance of his humble companion.

#### 4. *The case following the horse fight*

After quarrels which arose during a horse fight and after which Gunnarr is attacked, Njáll helps his friend out and prepares the case with much care<sup>67</sup>. He plays all his tricks such as asking Gunnarr to dig up dead people's bodies and declare them outlaws. However, this in itself seems insufficient as Gunnarr makes sure to secure the place with enough forces:

*Gunnarr hafði ok sendan mann mágum sínum at þeir skyldi ríða til þings ok fjölmen-  
na mjök, kvað þeim þetta mjök kappdrægt mundu verða*<sup>68</sup>.

"Gunnarr has also sent messengers to his brother-in-law, asking them to come to the Althing with as much support as possible, saying that it would be a hard-fought case"<sup>69</sup>.

Gunnarr and his followers indeed behave violently at the assembly, as they *Gingu allir í einum flokki ok fóru svá snúðigt, at men urðu at gæta sín, ef fyrir váru, at eigi fellu* ("all went about together in a close group, and walked so briskly that people in their path had to be careful not to be knocked over")<sup>70</sup>. Thanks to the support of Njáll and some other chieftains, Gunnarr wins the case and *Urðu allir á þat sáttir, at engi væri hans jafnini í Sunnlendingaffórðungi* ("everyone agreed that he had no equal in the South Quarter")<sup>71</sup>. Thus, Gunnarr is a hegemonic masculine man but to achieve this social respect he has to take the advice of balanced persons.

#### 5. *The combination against the Þorgeirrs*

The two Þorgeirrs (Otkelsson and Starkaðarson) plan to ambush the then lonely Gunnarr at Hlíðarendi. However, Njáll is reported about their intentions and sends Gunnarr away from the forthcoming attack. Njáll himself rides out to deter the Þorgeirrs with words, saying that Gunnarr is recruiting men and is coming to attack them and their company. Therefore, the Þorgeirrs immediately turn back and abandon the quest<sup>72</sup>. In this scene, again, Njáll's wisdom and the threat of Gunnarr's strength are combined to overcome a fierce enemy.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, pp. 160–166.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, pp. 163–164.

<sup>69</sup> *Njal's saga*, pp. 152–153.

<sup>70</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 164; *Njal's saga*, p. 153.

<sup>71</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 166; *Njal's saga*, p. 155.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, pp. 169–171.

## 6. *The lawsuit after the killing of Þorgeirr Otkelsson*

After Gunnarr kills a second person from the same family, Njáll's legal knowledge is required to pull him out from the mess in the following lawsuit<sup>73</sup>. With his cunning, Njáll achieves a decent settlement, and so Gunnarr only has to pay compensation instead of getting a harsher verdict. It is testified again that Gunnarr is involved in too much violence (perceived as too much "valour"), but to prevail socially he always needs reinforcement from wise, even-tempered people.

Gunnarr and Njáll rule if they cooperate<sup>74</sup>. They show up together at every assembly and even at a horse fight, practically at every social gathering where power relations should be exposed. That their relationship is an exceptional one and can be regarded as a fusion is not only demonstrated in the above-presented scenes, but also by an explicit expression coming from Óláfr pái, who says: *Mikils er vert, hversu fast Njáll stendr þér [Gunnarr] um alla ráðagerð* ("it's a great advantage to have Njáll supporting you [Gunnarr] so closely")<sup>75</sup>. Their relationship is probably the best-known friendship from the entire saga corpus, and the closeness of their bond even led some scholars to suspect these two men of a homoerotic attraction to one another<sup>76</sup>.

It was argued that Gunnarr and Njáll together have all the manly attributes but it is not obvious enough to what degree the lack of wisdom (in one case) or battle skills (in the other) may really detract from their (hegemonic) masculinity. Both of them are mocked several times in the saga for their unmanliness, but *Njáls saga* is somewhat of an exception among the family sagas regarding gender roles. As Ármann Jakobsson put it: "it sides with the queers rather than those who brand others as unmasculine"<sup>77</sup> and thus the statements made by often unsympathetic characters in the saga concerning unmanliness need not be said to represent the authorial view. Albeit not explicitly expressed in words, the course of events testifies about this "detraction", as both men become socially unsuccessful without the other. This was discussed in relation to Gunnarr, who got outlawed for his overbearing conduct, showing that "balance" is required to be socially favoured. In the *Eyrbyggja saga*, Snorri also needed a powerful ally to ensure his rule, which testifies the need of "valour".

Njáll's case is similar. After the death of Gunnarr, Njáll uses his sons to fight for him and for the position of the family in the district, much in the same way as when he previously used and united himself with Gunnarr<sup>78</sup>. That their relationship is quite close is testified by the fact that despite being married, all of the Njállsons live

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<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, pp. 180–181.

<sup>74</sup> For an exception: Cf. Cook, *Heroes and Heroism*..., p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 164; *Njal's saga*, p. 153.

<sup>76</sup> See discussion in: Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics*..., pp. 204–205.

<sup>77</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *Masculinity and Politics*..., p. 215.

<sup>78</sup> I.W. Miller, *Justifying Skarpheðinn: Of Pretext and Politics in the Icelandic Bloodfeud*, "Scandinavian Studies" 55:4 (1983), p. 334.

together with their father in Bergþórshváll<sup>79</sup>. Skarpheðinn and Högni take a bloody revenge for Gunnarr's death after which Njáll defends them at the þing, with the effect that their opponent Mörðr has to pay compensation<sup>80</sup>. In another scene, the Njállsons are after Hrappr and Þráinn, as a result of the difficulties which they once caused them in Norway. Njáll suggests not to attack them first, but let Hrappr and Þráinn first insult their opponents with words which would justify the Njállsons later violent actions against them<sup>81</sup>. In the third cooperation episode, Skarpheðinn and the others kill the murderers of their half-brother Höskuldr but, as a result of Njáll's negotiations with Höskuldr Hvítanessgoði, everything works out well<sup>82</sup>. However, when later Skarpheðinn ignores Njáll's advice and kills his own foster brother Höskuldr, the social decline of the kin starts<sup>83</sup>. When his sons discuss the plan to kill Höskuldr, Njáll notes to his wife: *Sjaldan var ek þá frá kvaddr; er in góðu váru ráðin* ("I was seldom excluded when their plans were wholesome")<sup>84</sup>. This sentence refers to the success they enjoy for as long as their fusion works and both sides contribute to the alliance.

Njáll is also determined to die without any help from valiant people. He is unable to defend himself and would be unable to avenge the actions after Flosi and his company set fire to his farm: *Ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna son minna* ("I am an old man now and ill-equipped to avenge my sons")<sup>85</sup>. Njáll's statement, again, emphasises the fact that "valour" and "balance" were both essential to ensure social domination, independent of the fact whether a character is being sympathetic or not.

## Conclusion

This study meant to illustrate that in the *Íslendingasögur*, a hegemonic masculine ideal is indeed frequently discernible in close connection with social status. An ideal man, therefore, had to be: (1) courageous and physically strong, (2) even-tempered and wise, and (3) possibly a chieftain.

Other types of masculinity models, such as men with too much (the berserks Halli and Leiknir) or too less (Þórarinn, Mörðr) inclination for bloodshed were

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<sup>79</sup> It is explicitly said in the saga that Skarpheðinn and Grímr stay at Njáll's farm after their marriage (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 71). The same can be assumed about Helgi as in a later chapter he and his wife are said to have returned home (to Bergþórshváll) to a feast before the guests arrived (*Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 91.)

<sup>80</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 196.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 226.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 253–254.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Miller, *Justifying Skarpheðinn...*

<sup>84</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 280; *Njal's saga*, p. 232.

<sup>85</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 330; *Njal's saga*, p. 267.



treated as socially inferior. These categories are far from being static and the different layers of masculinity could be crossed<sup>86</sup>. The dynamics of these relations are attested in the fact that the positions could be challenged (Snorri is envied by those who are braver), and people could overcome their shortages (Þórarinn after the revenge) or fall back in hierarchy (Gunnarr being outlawed). Sometimes the same person flounders between the co-existing layers of masculinity, falling from one category to the other, much as Hrafnkell in his saga. Here we have a character who initially uses too much strength, becomes unpopular and is considered unfit to be a leader. He then avoids using force by not avenging his honour for a long time. When his enemies ride across his territory, Hrafnkell's masculinity is mocked by his house-woman, saying the famous sentence that a man becomes feebler when he grows older: *Satt er flest þat, er fornkveðit er, at svá ergisk hvern sem eldisk*<sup>87</sup>. The housewoman continues with an overview of Hrafnkell's masculinity and compares it with the manliness of Hrafnkell's new opponent Eyvindr Bjarnarson who has come to Iceland from abroad:

*Verðr sú lítil virðing, sem snimma leggsk á, ef maðr lætr síðan sjálf af með ósóma ok hefir eigi traust til at reka þess réttar nökkurt sinni, ok eru sliik mikil undr um þann mann, sem hraustr hefir verit. Nú er annan veg þeira lífi, er upp vaxa með föður sínum, ok þykkja yðr einskis háttar hjá yðr, en þá er þeir eru frumvaxta, fara land af landi ok þykkja þar mestháttar, sem þá koma þeir, koma við þat út ok þykkjask þá höfðingjum meiri*<sup>88</sup>.

“The honour a man's given early in life isn't worth much, if he has to give it all up in disgrace, and hasn't the courage to fight for his rights ever again. It's a peculiar thing indeed to happen to those who were once thought brave. As for those who grew up with their father and who seemed to you utterly worthless compared to yourself, it's a different story, for as soon as they reached manhood they went abroad, travelling from country to country, and when they come back they're thought very highly of, even above chieftains”<sup>89</sup>.

Associating powerlessness with old age is a commonplace, enough to mention the old Egill Skallagrímsson, who is pushed around by women near the end of his saga<sup>90</sup>. However, what has been said about *Njáls saga*, that is statements made by individual saga characters applies here as well. The words of the house-woman need not be taken at face value and might not represent a general view

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<sup>86</sup> See also in accordance with the changes of the body: C. Phelpstead, *Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow: Hair Loss, the Tonsure, and Masculinity in Medieval Iceland*, “Scandinavian Studies” 85:1 (2013), p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, [in:] *Austfirðinga sögur*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Íslenzk Formrit. XI, Reykjavík 1950. p. 126; See also: Bandlien, *Man or Monster?*..., p. 122.

<sup>88</sup> *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>89</sup> *Hrafnkel's saga and other stories*, transl. by Hermann Pálsson, Penguin Books 1980, pp. 63–64.

<sup>90</sup> Clover, *Regardless of Sex*..., p. 382.

(especially since Hrafnkell is not particularly old at the time). Nevertheless, the events in the narrative prose all seem to confirm that a certain portion of violence or physical strength was indeed necessary for a man to rule socially. Namely, in the end, Hrafnkell manages to achieve a balance between violence and compromise, and finally regains the position of a chieftain. Throughout the course of the narrative, he flows between different social layers and his shifts are determined by his masculinity: first being “over-masculine”, which makes him lose his chieftaincy; then being “under-masculine”, which restrains him from becoming a leading chieftain again; and finally becoming “hegemonic masculine”, through which he earns back the leadership of the district.

Another way of changing layers was to apply the strategy of fusion. Chieftains who did not own both valiant and balanced attributes by birth, or could not acquire them later, could turn to very close alliances with each other on the basis of kinship (Snorri and Styrr) or through exceptional amicable bonds (Gunnarr and Njáll). Apart from the two examples discussed here, others could also be mentioned, such as, for instance, the brothers from *Vatnsdæla saga*: the valiant Jökull and the wise and sober Þorsteinn<sup>91</sup>. Other occurrences do not always fit the pattern of uniting the two different qualities, as either both parties are hegemonic types, or the saga is simply taciturn about the characters. However, many pairs in the saga literature seem to work in close alliances on the basis of kin. The cooperation of Hrótr and Høskuldr<sup>92</sup> as well as Gizurr hvíti and Geirr from *Brennu-Njáls saga* who *fylgðusk at hverju máli* (“acted together in everything”)<sup>93</sup> would also be possible examples of the phenomenon of fusion.<sup>94</sup>

These couples worked effectively in power struggles and it is not unlikely that the hegemonic masculine ideal, depicted in these selected family sagas served as a tool to legitimize the rule of the chieftain class in twelfth-thirteenth-century Iceland. The possibility of fusion perhaps worked as an ideology to justify political alliances of the era by stating that a particular community is going to be more successful with the combined forces of two chieftains, fit to be leaders by virtue of their inherent qualities: valour and balance.

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<sup>91</sup> See also: Lönnroth, *The Noble Heathen...*, p. 22.

<sup>92</sup> Cook, *Heroes and Heroism...*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>93</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, p. 119; *Njáls saga*, p. 119.

<sup>94</sup> They also owned together the *goðorð*.

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## WALECZNOŚĆ I RÓWNOWAGA: WARUNKI HEGEMONICZNEJ MĘSKOŚCI W SAGACH RODZINNYCH

### Streszczenie

Artykuł, poprzez zbadanie islandzkich sag rodzinnych w związku z pojęciem „męskości hegemonicznej”, ma na celu wykazanie silnego związku między męskością a statusem społecznym w średniowiecznej Islandii. Pojęcie to odnosi się do dynamiki kulturowej, którą grupa mężczyzn utrzymuje w celu marginalizacji innych. W średniowiecznej Islandii idea idealnego i rządzącego mężczyzny polegała na dzielnym zachowaniu i równie ważnym zachowaniu równowagi w codziennych konfliktach. Jednakże, jak zostało to zilustrowane, żadna z wyżej wymienionych cech sama w sobie nie była wystarczająca, aby uzyskać tytuł „idealnego mężczyzny”: osoby posiadające tylko jedną cechę pozostawały w liminalnej fazie nie tylko ze względu na płeć, ale także grupę społeczną. Różne ograniczenia indywidualnych męskości można jednak przekroczyć, stosując strategię polityczną, którą nazywam tutaj „fuzją”, w której dwie osoby, każda z nich posiadająca jeden z atrybutów, jednoczą się, aby zbudować hegemoniczny męski ideał. Tak jest w przypadku dwóch słynnych sag rodzinnych: *Eyrbyggja saga* i *Njáls saga*, w których pary takie jak Snorri Goði i Styrr, a także Njáll i Gunnarr współpracują w celu osiągnięcia społecznej dominacji.