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## Code of honour under debate in two Icelandic sagas<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the prevailing honour code in two Old Norse sagas, namely one saga about early Icelanders, the saga of Gisle Sursson, *Gisla saga Súrssonar* and one dealing with events from a late medieval society, the saga of Torgils and Havlide, *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*. Jørgensen shows how honour functions as a driving force behind human actions, but also how the honour code changes with the transition from the old honour culture to the nascent Christian society.

**KEY WORDS** saga | honour | respect | values | Norse culture

### INTRODUCTION

For the protagonists in the Sagas of Icelanders, honour acts as a motivation and a driving force. But although the heroes may follow the honour code in every detail, the outcome is usually tragic. The sagas are written well into the Christian period and the discrepancy between a brave and honourable action and its tragic results may imply a criticism of the clan society's code of honour. A good example here is the saga of Gisli Sursson (*Gisla saga Súrssonar*, here: *Gisli Sursson's saga*).

Saga hero Gisli Sursson does everything right as far as the code of honour is concerned. This ensures him an honourable death, but leads to the ruination of his family and his property, even though it was precisely his family he sought to defend. If one accepts the honour-based ethics of the clan society as a premise for interpreting the saga, Gisli appears as a tragic but exemplary hero. He does his duty, but still drives himself and his family to destruction.

The story ends with the widows of the protagonists turning their backs on the smoking ruins of their lives in Iceland and setting out on a pilgrimage – into the new era. The saga was written at a time when the Icelandic Commonwealth was in decline and the Church had long since become powerful and well organised. It

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1. This article is translated by Richard Burgess.

is therefore reasonable to suppose that Gisli's heroic status was problematic in the author's own times and that the saga makes the clan society's honour code the subject of debate in the light of new ideals of Christian humility and forgiveness.

In the Contemporary saga of Thorgils and Haflidi (*Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, here: *The Saga of Thorgils and Haflidi*), the action takes place in the Christian 12<sup>th</sup> century, but this story too is probably written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as *Gisli Sursson's saga* is. Here the main conflict is resolved on the basis of Christian values. This is achieved without honour being de-emphasised, but the concept of honour has a different content. Although Gisli steadfastly adheres to the old code of honour, the new era with its Christian values also leaves its mark on *Gisli Sursson's saga*. The difference in message between the two sagas is not as great as it might seem on the surface.

## THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS

As a genre the Sagas of Icelanders are defined by the fact that the main characters live in Iceland and are often descendants of the first Icelandic settlers. The action is set in the period between the first settlement and Christianisation around 1000 AD. The main events take place in the Commonwealth period, i.e. in the time after the Icelandic *Althing* was established in 930.

The Icelandic Commonwealth is described in the Grágás collection of laws and in the rich saga literature as an organised society with common laws for the whole country as well as regional *things* that were all subordinated to the *Althing* at Tingvellir. At the *thing*, laws were passed and judgements delivered. There were clear rules for how cases were to be conducted, for presenting testimony and for the composition of courts. It was thus an institution with many of the features of a constitutional state (nomocracy). However, we can clearly see in the sagas that 'might makes right'. If a chieftain has enough power, he can pressure the judges or can simply prevent the legal process from being carried out. It is also possible, with the help of skilful advisors, to trick an adversary into making errors so that the litigation comes to nothing. Dramatic litigation is a favourite theme in the Sagas of Icelanders.

A man who had suffered injury and served a summons at the *thing* had to have a certain leverage in order to ensure that the case got a fair hearing and that a judgement was delivered. Even if an offender was successfully convicted, the state had no executive authority that could punish the offender or collect fines. The plaintiff had to take care of this himself. For a serious offence an offender might be outlawed. This meant the loss of legal protection and that his adversaries could

take his life and perhaps his property (see Magnús Már Lárusson 1981: 603–608). But that presupposed that the plaintiff was in a position to carry this out.

## THE CLAN SOCIETY

The old clan society was still alive and kicking throughout the Commonwealth. An individual had scant chance of defending himself against injustice without allies. Alliances were the individual's safety net. As part of a strong alliance you were sure of support in the event of conflict.

Everyone was born into an alliance, namely the family or clan. Family ties were therefore unbreakable. You owed your family full loyalty and could expect the same. But this alliance could be extended in several ways. Marriage was one means of building alliances between families. Marriage was thus a political tool for the family and too important to be left to the feelings and wishes of the individual. Alliance building could also be achieved through fostering children, a common occurrence in saga literature as well in historical reality. An individual could also extend his network by entering into foster brotherhood with a friend. Foster brotherhood meant that the parties assumed the same obligations to each other as if they were brothers. Another common form of alliance building was through friendship, sealed with an exchange of gifts.

The Sagas of Icelanders are realistic representations. Characters are complex, as they are in real life, and have their strong and weak sides. Even the most outstanding heroes can make mistakes and behave foolishly. In all families there can be contemptible individuals who behave treacherously and abuse alliances. If a person ends up in a serious conflict, the alliance is obliged to help him whatever the cause of the conflict. If the hero's brother is both weak and unreliable and gets into trouble due to his own stupidity, it is still the duty of the hero to risk both his life and his property to help him. People in the sagas adhere to this obligation to loyalty because the price of failing to do so is so high, namely a loss of honour.

Honour is the very backbone of the clan society and impacts on both the individual and the collective. Everyone benefits from the honour of the family he is born into. It is founded on the family's history, its power and property or on the fame of particular relatives. Each individual can then increase his honour through his own conduct and actions, or he can squander it by evading his obligations or by committing dishonourable acts. A person without honour is without dignity and lacks the most important capital with which to build alliances.

## THE CHURCH

Christianity was adopted at the *Althing* in 1000 AD. This cultural turning point also marks that the waning of the historical period that is the setting of the Sagas of Icelanders, the clan society's code of honour being unable completely to sustain its legitimacy within a Christian framework. But although Christianity could be adopted by law through an *Althing* resolution, the cultural transition took time. It had started well before 1000, but much of the cultural legacy of the pre-Christian clan society remained in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when the sagas were written.

While the clan society demanded absolute loyalty to a collective, to an alliance, Christianity demanded absolute loyalty to God. The individual is also ascribed a soul which must be nurtured in accordance with the will of God and with an eye to an eternal life. New ideals such as humility, placidity and forgiveness represented alternatives to self-assertion, violence and revenge. When the Sagas of Icelanders were being written, the Church was well established in Iceland with a powerful administration, an abundant priesthood, churches and monasteries. Written culture in itself had ecclesiastical origins, and there is reason to believe that saga literature too grew under the auspices of the church (see especially Lönnroth, 1964).

## TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

Most of the Sagas of Icelanders are written in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in a period that saw a transition from a clan society with an unstable balance of power between chieftains to a more up-to-date society with strong ecclesiastical power subordinated to a king.

The action in the Icelandic sagas also takes place in a transitional period, namely the conflict between paganism and Christianity. This conflict provides a backdrop for the action in *Gisli Sursson's saga*. Gisli and his friend Vestein are trading in Denmark. Christians could not trade with pagans who had not received the *prima signatio* (i.e. been marked with the sign of the cross), and in the longer version (S, see below p. 41) it is explicitly stated that Gisli and Vestein receive *prima signatio* (chap 13).<sup>2</sup> *Prima signatio* was no baptism, but a ritual that allowed for communication and trade with Christians. Both versions tell that after this Gisli refrains from making sacrifices to pagan gods (chap S15/M10). However, he is still unwavering in his fidelity to the old clan society's code of honour. His spirit

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2. All citations and references to *Gisli Sursson's saga* are from *Íslenzk fornrit VI*. The translations are by the author in cooperation with Richard Burgess.

of self-sacrifice for family and honour knows no bounds, as we shall see. Gisli always takes responsibility when his alliance is threatened or harmed. Measured according to the old code of honour, he appears as an exemplary hero.

### GISLI SURSSON'S SAGA

*Gisli Sursson's saga* is preserved in its entirety in two versions, a shorter (M) and a longer (S). The main difference is that the preliminary chapters are somewhat longer in S. Opinions differ as to which version is most original. The traditional view is that the short version is most original (Finnur Jónsson 1923: 453; Björn K. Þórólfsson 1943), but this view has been criticised, perhaps most rigorously by Jónas Kristjánsson and Guðni Kolbeinsson (1979). We will not discuss this further here. This analysis will be based on M, but in cases where there are significant differences between the two versions, I will also refer to the longer version. Unless otherwise specified, references will be to the shorter version (M). M is preserved in AM 556a 4to from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (ÍF VI:XLIII), S in two younger paper manuscripts that both are based on a lost medieval manuscript.

Gisli grew up in Norway with his siblings Thorkel and Thordis. His brother Ari was raised by an uncle. His father was called Thorbjorn and gained the nickname Sourpuss (*súr*). Gisli commits an honour killing that leads to his family having to flee the country. They settle in Iceland, and here the three siblings find spouses. Gisli gets Aud, sister of Vestein Vesteinsson, Thorkel gets Asgerd and Thordis marries Thorgrim. The two brothers and their brother-in-laws seem at first a strong alliance, but a prophecy says that there soon be division between them. In an attempt to consolidate their unity, Gisli initiates a ceremony to make all four foster-brothers. However, this fails and the group is split up: Gisli and Vestein stay together while Thorkel and Thorgrim, who are also brothers-in-law, form their own alliance. One night Vestein is killed and Gisli undertakes to avenge his foster-brother. He understands that it is his brother Thorkel and his brother-in-law Thorgrim who are behind the killing and he takes revenge on Thorgrim. Gisli is outlawed for this killing. He lives in hiding for many years until fate catches up with him. These conflicts prove the ruin of Gisli's family, and in the saga's epilogue the widows of Gisli and Vestein turn their backs on Iceland and their old lives. They are baptised in Denmark and embark on a pilgrimage to Rome.

## HONOUR KILLING

In her youth in Norway Thordis received the attention of Bard, a young freeholder. Thordis's father, Thorbjorn, did not approve of this liaison and forbade Bard to visit Thordis. But Bard did not care about 'what an old man says' (kvað ómæt ómaga orð). Thorbjorn incited his sons to do something about this, the heaviest responsibility lying with Thorkel, who was the elder. The incitement is presented in more detail in the longer version (S). Here we can read that both brothers were good friends with Bard and that Gisli first tries to persuade his friend to stay away from Thordis. In M it is stated that Thorkel and Bard are friends. We are not told what Gisli thinks about Bard, only that he dislikes of what he says about his father. Neither are we told what Thordis feels for her suitor, but we can guess that she has nothing against him. One day when Bard and the two brothers are together, Gisli suddenly draws a sword and cuts Bard down (M chap 6).

By killing Bard, Gisli is defending family honour in the face of Bard's provocation as well as the right of the head of the family to decide whom the daughter should marry. What Gisli feels about Bard is just as irrelevant as what Thordis feels. According to convention, it was the elder of the two sons who was first in line to carry out the killing, but Gisli understood that his brother was unwilling to set aside his friendship with Bard for the sake of family honour. After the killing, Thorkel sits down with Bard's corpse. This reaction is a familiar motif in saga literature as a way of showing grief over a lost friend. The saga tells how Gisli tries to cheer up his brother by offering to exchange swords so that Thorkel gets the one that bites best.

Emotions are not described directly in the Sagas of Icelanders. It is only through words and deeds that we get to know what people are thinking or feeling. We can only guess at the motivation behind Gisli's offer of exchanging swords. However, it is no surprise that Thorkel declines the offer. What pleasure could he possibly gain from a sword coloured with his friend's blood? Was this simply mockery on Gisli's part, or was it really intended as a friendly gesture? We can imagine that Gisli lacks empathy and is thus able to follow the code of honour ruthlessly. This would also explain why he is unable to understand his brother's reaction after the killing. It is more likely, however, that Gisli has a great ability to control his empathy in order to act honourably. As we follow Gisli through the saga, we see that his actions are guided by a strict logic. He follows the code of honour far beyond the bounds of reasonableness. This is most likely also the case in this episode. By offering his brother the weapon that killed Bard, he is also offering Thorkel credit for the killing. As the elder son, Thorkel would be able to go home to his father and show him that family honour was satisfied.<sup>3</sup>

We are told nothing about how the killing affected Gisli's relationship to Thordis, but we are told that the relationship between the brothers was never the same again after this. That is an understatement. Here too there are important differences between the two versions. In M we are told that Thorkel refuses to live at home after the killing and goes to Bard's relation Skeggi, urging him to avenge Bard and marry Thordis. Here Thorkel is committing a serious act of treachery against his own family. From failing to take action to protect family honour because of friendship, he is now actively bringing revenge and shame on his own family. This is unheard of in a clan society, but ironically it shows considerable courage – and there is little that accrues more honour than courage. Thorkel is actively and openly defying the conventions of a clan society. Preben Meulengracht Sørensen believes Thorkel's betrayal of his family, as in M, is so unheard of that he doubts whether it belongs to the original version (Meulengracht Sørensen 2001: 40–41). While it is possible that this feature is secondary, it is nonetheless significant that it is undoubtedly present in the 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript.

Thorkel's reaction is also rendered differently in S, where incidentally the suitor's name is Kolbein. Thorkel is distressed by the killing, but there is no mention of him sitting with the corpse or of exchanging swords. Thorkel is not happy at home, but in S he goes to his mother's family and not to Skeggi. However, there is a lacuna in the manuscript here, so we don't know the end of this episode.

## THE KILLING OF VESTEIN AND GISLI'S REVENGE

In Iceland the brothers Gisli and Thorkel run the farm together. Thorkel doesn't contribute much, but Gisli makes no complaint. One day Thorkel is at home and overhears a conversation that triggers a new conflict. Once again it is forbidden love that is the issue. Thorkel hears the two women Aud and Asgerd discussing in the women's house. It emerges that Asgerd, Thorkel's wife, has an eye for Vestein, Gisli's foster-brother and brother-in-law. Now it is Thorkel's honour that is challenged. It also emerges that Aud had been infatuated with Thorgrim before she married Gisli.

Shortly afterwards, Thorkel demands a division of their inheritance. Gisli reluctantly accepts this, and they agree that Gisli will have the farm, while Thorkel will have the movable property and move to Thordis and his brother-in-law Thorgrim.

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3. I owe this interpretation of the sword exchange as a transference of honour to student Aleksander Søreide, who suggested it during a discussion of the saga in a teaching session in Spring 2016.

One night when Vestein is visiting Gisli, there is a violent storm. While Gisli and his labourers are out bringing in the hay, someone enters the house and runs a spear through Vestein. As soon as Gisli understands what has happened, he declares he will avenge the killing in accordance with his oath.

Gisli, like Vestein's killer, strikes under cover of darkness. He exacts his revenge on Thorgrim and escapes unnoticed. After the killing, Thordis marries Thorgrim's brother, Bork. Soon Gisli lets his sister know that he did the killing, and after a while she informs Bork. Gisli is outlawed, and Bork starts an intense hunt for him.

Gisli's revenge is problematical. The saga gives no definite information about who carried out the killing of Vestein, only that it is the alliance of Thorkel and Thorgrim that was responsible. According to the code of honour, the important thing was not that revenge necessarily should strike the killer directly, but that it should strike his alliance at the same level, or higher, than the offence that was sustained. We see many examples of this, for example in *Njál's saga*. It places Gisli in a difficult dilemma. He can't kill his own brother, and his killing of Thorgrim impacts on his brother and, not least, his sister.

There are clear parallels between this conflict and the previous honour killing in Norway. The context is forbidden love, and again Thordis's fiancé and the brother's friend are on the receiving end. In Norway, Gisli defends the family's honour by killing an unwanted suitor, while his brother supports the suitor. In Iceland the roles are different. Thorkel is challenged by the fact that his wife has a forbidden sweetheart who is an ally of Gisli. This clearly demonstrates that it is not the nature of the provocation that decides Gisli's actions, but whom he has the strongest bonds of loyalty to and what his responsibilities are in an alliance.

The morning after the killing of Thorgrim, a large group of men lead by Thorkel arrive at Gisli's farm. Thorkel sees Gisli's wet shoes and understands that his brother has been out during the night. He pushes them under the bed so that his companions will not see them. Thorkel understands that Gisli is the culprit and actively but discretely prevents him being exposed.

Later Gisli reveals his guilt to Thordis through a skaldic verse. To Gisli's disappointment, Thordis informs Bork of this. When Gisli hears of this revelation he composes a new verse in which he compares his sister to Gudrun Gjukadottir from the Eddic poems. Not least in the *Lay of Atli (Atlakviða)* we hear of Gudrun's boundless loyalty to her own family. When her husband, King Atli, kills her brothers Gunnar and Hogni, Gudrun herself exacts revenge and kills her husband and their two sons. Gisli makes the point that his sister is not like Gudrun.

As a married woman, Thordis has a double loyalty – on the one side to her brother and her biological family, on the other to her husband and the family

she is married into. A woman retains the bonds to her biological family in spite of being included in a new one. This is indeed the prerequisite for the function of marriage as a tool for building alliances. As a wife, she is part of the husband's family, and as long as she is married she owes his family loyalty. If she can't meet these requirements, she must demand a divorce. To Gisli's disappointment, Thordis on this occasion confirms her loyalty to her husband's family.

### THE KILLING OF THORKEL

Vestein had two young sons, and they were first in line to avenge his killing. Gisli may have taken responsibility upon himself because the boys were too young, but there are many examples in the sagas of revenge pending for many years until the avenger reaches adulthood. There is no short deadline for revenge. Gisli may have harboured jealous feelings towards the man Aud had previously been interested in and this may have influenced his decision to take responsibility for exacting revenge. It is also possible that Gisli makes Thorgrim the target of revenge in order to protect his brother from the later vengeance of Vestein's sons. If so, this strategy was as unsuccessful as his attempt at foster-brotherhood, because after Gisli had lived as an outlaw for several years, Thorkel falls victim to revenge nonetheless. Vestein's sons feel that their father has not been adequately avenged until Thorkel is killed. The boys dupe Thorkel as he and his retinue are setting up camp at the *thing*. They flatter him, praise his garments and ask to see his magnificent sword. Thorkel appears as a vain fool and is humiliatingly killed with his own sword.

The scene that follows is interesting. The boys seek refuge with their aunt Aud, where the outlawed Gisli is also hiding. Aud in her wisdom understands that Gisli cannot meet his brother's killers. She provides the boys with food and sends them off before speaking to Gisli. And Gisli once again reacts logically, as Aud had anticipated – his duty is to avenge his brother. Gisli's predicament is that he has been declared an outlaw because he avenged the killing of Vestein, the boys' father. They have now done the same and killed Thorkel, who for Gisli has been a constant source of disappointment. Gisli and the boys are now more or less in the same boat. Even so, Gisli is ready to dash off after the boys and kill them, but changes his mind when Aud says that they are gone. For Gisli, the logic of revenge kicks in immediately, but he quickly lets it pass. One would imagine that a cunning hero like Gisli would soon have been able to get his hands on the boys if he had wanted to. Perhaps there is a certain ambivalence that stops him, a sign that he is not entirely without empathy, not to mention common sense. The idea that Gisli should be driven to

wreaking revenge on the sons of his foster-brother borders on the absurd and clearly shows the saga throwing a critical light at the logic of revenge.

### GISLI'S DOWNFALL

Bork, who is Thorgrim's brother and now also Thordis's husband, pays a man, Eyjolf Grey, to kill Gisli, but it turns out to be a difficult task. Gisli lives for many years as an outlaw, showing both strength and heroism in his struggle to survive, and loses everything he owns. His loyal Aud supports him to the end. When his enemies finally catch up with him, he defends himself alone against fifteen men. Two of them admittedly have their hands full restraining Aud and foster-daughter Gudrid while the fighting is in progress. Gisli kills five men before finally succumbing. Three more die of their wounds after the battle. Gisli's opponents gain no honour from their victory, but in the context of the clan society's norms, Gisli achieves what is most important: an honourable death.

### AMBIVALENCE

The sagas provide many examples that women are also ruled by the code of honour. Thordis's actions should be understood in the light of the hopeless conflict of loyalty she finds herself in. When Eyjolf had finally managed to carry out his mission after encountering many setbacks and much shame, he comes to visit Bork and Thordis. Bork receives him well, but Thordis rather coldly. When serving him porridge, she loses a spoon on the floor and crawls under the table to fetch it. Then she grasps Eyjolf's sword and tries to stab him in the stomach. The sword's hilt catches on the table and the result is just a flesh wound in his thigh. Her husband offers Eyjolf *sjalfdæmi* for the injury.<sup>4</sup> Thordis reacts by declaring herself divorced from Bork.

Thordis's reaction is unexpected. After all, she was the one who gave her brother away, thereby demonstrating her loyalty to her husband. Now she does the opposite, crossing her husband to avenge her brother. Furthermore, she takes the consequences of breaking her loyalty to her husband and declares herself divorced from him. It is difficult to see any logical reason for Thordis's change of loyalty. The explanation may lie in an underlying ambivalence. Thordis has probably had mixed feelings about her brother right from the time he killed her sweetheart in Norway.

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4. *Sjalfdæmi* is well known from saga literature. The perpetrator of an assault allows the injured party to decide compensation for the injury while committing himself to accept the verdict.

At the same time, she is familiar with the code of honour that governed Gisli's actions. She didn't go straight home and give Gisli away to her husband, but waited a long while. When Gisli's killer comes visiting and she is encouraged by her husband to offer him hospitality, her conflict of loyalty becomes unbearable.

According to the old code of honour, Gisli doesn't put a foot wrong. If one accepts its premises, Gisli is an exemplary hero. He puts all personal feelings and considerations aside in the face of his duties to the alliance. He shoulders responsibility when his brother fails to and kills the unwanted suitor. He avenges his foster-brother even though it impacts on those close to him. He is willing to avenge his brother even though Thorkel didn't give him the support he expected. He doesn't seek conflict, he never provokes, but he takes the offensive without hesitation when duty calls. As an outlaw he manages to stay alive longer than any other, and by virtue of his strength and courage he ensures that his enemies gain dishonour even when he is overcome by superior force.

Thorkel is portrayed as Gisli's opposite. Where Gisli defends his family's honour, Thorkel fails. He is lazy where Gisli is hardworking. Gisli dies in battle against a superior force, while Thorkel is cut down by a couple of boys in the midst of his own men. In one scene after another, Gisli appears as the brave hero doing his duty, while Thorkel is spineless. But Thorkel too is ambivalent. His defence of Bard shows that he doesn't lack courage. By hiding Gisli's wet shoes, he shows that he has understood that Gisli is the culprit, but he doesn't give him away. And while Gisli is outlawed, Thorkel gives him support, albeit half-heartedly.

Gisli appears as a firm and consistent defender of the old clan society. But neither is he without ambivalence. After his encounter with Christianity in Denmark, he refrains from pagan sacrifice. He also has one foot in the new era while following the old code of honour.

Throughout his years as an outlaw, Gisli is haunted by dreams. Some nights the dark figure of a woman comes to him with terrible visions of blood and suffering. But other nights he sees a bright figure of a woman who promises him a good life after this one. His death is not in doubt with either of them. It seems natural to associate the bright figure with Christianity and the hope for a better life in the hereafter, and the dark figure as the opposite (see Mundal 1993: 29–30). The latter makes him anxious. There is no doubt that Gisli is drawn to the bright figure.

On one occasion ambivalence may play a role in hampering Gisli's willingness to act and thus preventing further tragic consequences. This is when he fails to pursue Vestein's sons after their killing of Thorkel.

The frequent ambivalence that permeates the saga reflects the conflict between the old and the new era, between the honour-based conventions of a clan society and the new ideals of the Christian state.

There is no doubt that Gisli's chief motivation is to defend his family's honour. When he hears that his sister had given him away, he says: 'mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en sjalfs mín.' ('Her dishonour has not seemed better to me than my own.' Chap M19) Here Gisli explicitly states that his actions are motivated by his duty to protect his own and his family's honour.

## PROBLEMATIC HONOUR

In a modern state based on a Christian or Humanist view of human life, killing cannot be condoned as a response in human relations. An honour killing like the one Gisli commits in Norway would be met with disgust and condemnation. The saga has arisen in a Christian society where a new culture with new ethical ideals is in the process of displacing the old honour code of the clan society. However, it hasn't been difficult for more recent saga readers to accept the clan society's honour culture as a yardstick for the hero's actions and thus grant him ethical acceptance. This may not have been so straightforward in the saga writer's own time. A close reading of the saga reveals a problematic hero, while honour killing would certainly have been considered problematic by the Christian 13<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier scholars have also pointed out this perspective: see, for example, Clark (2007: 514). The sagas of the Icelanders never moralise, they tell a story and let the reader process his or her impressions. If a man does everything right according to society's norms and it leads to catastrophe, it might be that there is something wrong with society's norms. In this way the saga of Gisli Surrsson makes the code of honour the subject of debate.

## THE SAGA OF THORGILS AND HAFLIDI

It is not only in the Sagas of Icelanders that honour and revenge are driving forces in a spiral of violence. The Saga of Thorgils and Hafliði is regarded as belonging to the Contemporary sagas, since it is preserved in the great compilation of Contemporary sagas known as *Sturlunga saga*. The action takes place in the period 1117–21, i.e. well into Christian times, but nevertheless the honour code of the clan society seems to have a firm hold on the protagonists. The saga depicts a conflict that develops between two powerful and highly respected chieftains, Thorgils

Oddason and Hafliði Masson. Both are described as wise and likeable men, and both behave in an exemplary fashion as far as possible.

The conflict is initiated by Hafliði's nephew, Ma. He is an insufferable conniver whose behaviour is both unjust and violent. After having killed the kind farmer Thorstein and provoked the killing of Neiti, one of Hafliði's liegemen, he seeks refuge with his uncle. Hafliði makes no attempt to defend Ma's actions, calling him 'a disgrace to his family'. He thinks his nephew is undeserving of help and should be excluded from the clan. But as the man of honour he is, he pays the settlement for the killing of Thorstein and provides protection for Ma.

Neiti's family, for their part, have entrusted the case to Thorgils, since Ma had already sought refuge with Hafliði. The case now stands between these two chieftains. Through unfortunate circumstances and Ma's conniving, the conflict escalates. The two respected chieftains invest more and more honour in the case. Things reach a head when Thorgils brings an axe along to the *thing* and attacks Hafliði, chopping off one of his fingers. For this Hafliði gets Thorgils outlawed. But being a powerful man, Thorgils mobilises hundreds of men for the next *thing*. Thorgils also has a large following and the situation is as tense as at the outbreak of war. At this point the Church mediates. The bishop forbids the priesthood from fighting on Hafliði's side and encourages them to intervene instead.

Thorgils is prepared to offer Hafliði self-judgement in settling the dispute, as is fitting for generous chieftains and also in keeping with the clan society's honour code, but he sets the condition that the issues of outlawry, *goðorð* (chieftainship)<sup>5</sup> and residence should be kept out of the settlement. At first Hafliði will not accept these conditions, but he acquiesces after mediation by the priests. He accepts to reconciliation, but demands a substantial fine: eight times the man-price Hafliði had paid for Thorstein. People think this is unreasonable, and one spectator comments 'Dýrr myndi Hafliði allr, ef svá skyldi hverr limr' (The whole of Hafliði would be expensive if every limb had cost as much. Chap 31).<sup>6</sup>

However, Thorgils gladly accepts the fine and declares himself well satisfied: 'Gefi menn vel hljóð máli Hafliða, því at hér hefir hvárr okkar þat, er vel má una'. ('People should listen well to Hafliði, for here we can both be satisfied with what

5. A chieftainship (*goðorð*) was an area ruled by a cheiftain (*goði*). The cheiftain had the right to attend the Althing with two followers. A cheiftain was not elected and the chieftainship could be transferred to others like other property.

6. All citations and references to the saga of Thorgils and Hafliði (*Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*) are from Guðni Jónsson's edition of *Sturlunga saga*, 1948. The translations are by the present author.

we have got. Chap 31). When Haflidi sees Thorgils' reaction he understands that Thorgils was truly willing to reach a settlement even at such a high price, and that explains the size of the fine. The large sum was not due to greed. In the epilogue we are told that the two chieftains after this always supported each other, and Thorgils gave Haflidi expensive gifts that bound them together as allies.

Gisli Surrsson remains loyal to honour code of the clan society and sacrifices his life and possessions for it. By the yardstick of the old code of honour he could be said to die with honour as a strong, courageous and steadfast saga hero.

It was the old code of honour that drove two decent men, Thorgils and Haflidi, to the edge of war and catastrophe. But here the conflict reaches a different resolution under the auspices of the Church. Reconciliation is achieved on the basis of a new code of honour founded on Christian values. On this basis Haflidi could renounce revenge without losing honour. With this resolution, both parties emerge strengthened from the conflict.

*Gisli Surrsson's saga* also has an epilogue in which we are told that the two widows leave home, receive baptism and set out on a pilgrimage. It is a clear message that the days of the old code of honour are over.

## WORDS FOR HONOUR AND SHAME IN THE TWO SAGAS

Our analysis of the action in *Gisli Surrsson's saga* and *The Saga of Torgils and Haflidi* has shown that the sagas throw a critical light on the clan society's honour code, with the latter saga introducing a new code of honour based on Christian values. We will now see that this interpretation is also reflected in the narrators' choice of vocabulary.

Honour in the sagas of the Icelanders was the theme of Preben Meulengracht Sørensen's dissertation *Fortælling og ære* [Narrative and honour] (1995). Here he discusses the terminology of honour: 'De ord der i sagaernes verden hyppigst bruges for ære, er [The words most commonly used for honour in the sagas are] *sómi*, *sómð*, *virðing*, *metorð* og [and] *metnaðr*' (Meulengracht Sørensen 1995: 188). Perhaps even more important than gaining honour in the sagas is avoiding loss of honour. A common word for loss of honour is *skómm* (shame). The same words that denote honour are used in a negated form to denote disgrace or loss of honour: *ósómi*, *ósómð*, *óvirðing*, *svívirðing* or *vanvirðing*.

If we take the words for honour/shame emphasised by Meulengracht Sørensen and trace them in *Gisli Surrssons saga* (M), we get the result shown in table 1.

**TABLE 1.** Words for honour and shame in *Gisli Surrsson's saga*

Words for honour	Words for shame	Number of occurrences
	<i>skömm</i> (shame)	4
	<i>óvirðing</i> (disgrace)	2
	<i>svívirðing</i> (shame)	3
	<i>engi virðingaför</i> (not honourable conduct)	1
<i>sóma</i> (honour)		1
<i>sómð</i> (honour)		3
<i>sómilegsta</i> (most honourable)		1
<i>sómðarauki</i> (increased honour)		1
<i>virðing</i> (reputation)		4
10 occurrences	10 occurrences	20 occurrences

The poems are excluded from these statistics. Of the 20 occurrences, 10 stand for 'loss of honour' (negative honour): *skömm*, *óvirðing*, *svívirðing*, *enga virðingaför*.

In addition, three occurrences of words for honour are negated in their context: Aud does not think Thorgrim and Thorkel deserving of *sómðarauki* (increased honour), and in Gisli's last battle we are told of his opponents that 'þeir sáu að þar lá við **sómð** þeirra og **virðing**'<sup>7</sup> (they understood that their honour and reputation was at stake. Chap M36) – which they are unable to defend.

In only two of the examples do words for (dis)honour refer to Gisli Surrsson, and these don't represent an authorial description of Gisli. The first example is spoken by Gisli himself when he hears that his sister has given him away: 'mér hefir eigi hennar óvirðing betri þótt en sjálfs mín' (Her dishonour has not been better to me than my own. Chap M19) The other is spoken by Thorkel. In some ball games arranged by the family, Thorkel urges Gisli not to hold back against Thorgrim: 'en eg ynni þér allvel að þú fengir sem mesta **virðing** af ef þú ert sterkari' (and I would wish wholeheartedly that you will gain the most possible honour from this, if you are the strongest). Although honour is Gisli's driving force, the narrator is remarkably cautious about explicitly crediting Gisli with honour for his actions.

7. Words in bold type here and in the the text that follows are highlighted by the present author.

The first two occurrences of the word *skømm* concern the consequences of evading battle. Ari, the brother of Gisli's grandfather, is challenged by the berserk Bjorn blakki to a battle over his farm and his wife. Ari would 'heldur berjast en hvorttveggja yrði að **skømm**, hann og kona hans' (rather fight than that they, both he and his wife, incurred shame. Chap M1) Thordis's suitor Kolbein finds himself in a similar situation and is challenged by Duelling Skeggi. When Kolbein backs out, Gisli tells what a wretch he is: 'Gisli biður hann mæla allra manna armastan, og "þótt þú verðir allur að **skømm** þá skal eg nú þó fara.'" Gisli scolded him as a wretch, and 'even if you incur the worst shame, I will nonetheless fight.' Chap M2)

Bork's alliance suffers to killings, first his brother Thorgrim and then Thorkel. In both cases we are told that Bork gains dishonour when the killings are not avenged (Chap 19, Chap 29).

Many of the examples concern loss of honour incurred by Gisli's opponents. They bring shame (*skømm*) on themselves when Aud throws a wallet in Eyjolf's face (Chap M32). And shame (*skømm*) and disgrace (*svívirðing*) when they are fooled and Gisli escapes (Chap M32). There is also in the last battle scene where Gisli prophesises that his opponents will reap dishonour for the killing (*svívirðing fyrir mannskaða*) (Chap M36), and in the next chapter (Chap M37) the narrator confirms that those that survived the battle only reaped dishonour (*fengu þó óvirðing*). To the extent that words for shame and honour are found in Gisli Surs-son's saga, they are always used in accordance with the old code of honour, and there is a clear emphasis on loss of honour rather than increased honour. You bring shame on yourself by not avenging, by not daring to fight, by significantly outnumbering an opponent or by being hit by a woman.

It is striking how the saga narrator avoids using honour words when referring to Gisli and his actions. Gisli's actions nevertheless appear honourable for the reader because his opponents lose honour through the many defeats they suffer in their manhunt for him. The narrator never fails to mention these losses of honour, but never characterises Gisli with honour words.

Fate finally catches up with Gisli. In the dialogue before and during the battle Gisli overtly reminds his opponents of the dishonour he wishes for them, and the narrator confirms this with his comments. It seems reasonable to accord Gisli *virðing* for the courage and strength of arms he displays. Naturally, Gisli's honour could be said to grow proportionally with the dishonour incurred by his opponents. But this is not stated in the text. Not even in the last battle are honour words used in reference to Gisli.

If we look for the same words in *The Saga of Thorgils and Haflidi*, we find 33 occurrences: *sómi*, *sómd*, *metnad*, *virðing*, *skómm*. (4 examples of the verb *virða*/the participle *virður* are not included). The saga is only 2/3 the length of *Gisli Surs-son's saga* (M), so the frequency of honour words is much higher. The narrator is not as reluctant to associate Thorgils and Haflidi with honour words as the narrator in *Gisli Surs-son's saga*.

Another difference is that words for loss of honour are seldom used. There are only four occurrences: *svívirðing*, *ósómi*, *skómm*, *frændaskómm*. The word *skómm* is used by the villain Ma when he goads his naïve companion by calling shame upon him if he doesn't fight the blameless Neiti whom Ma himself has attacked. When Ma seeks refuge with his uncle, Haflidi calls him *frændaskómm* (a disgrace to his family). The word is used in connection with recovering honour, in the sense of 'redress'. After Thorgils' protégé Olaf is humiliated by Ma, Thorgils urges him to avenge it: 'Þetta er þó mitt ráð, at þú leitir eftir **sómd** þinni' (This, however, is my advice that you seek your redress. Chap 5). The word **sómd** is used with the same meaning by Haflidi too after the killing of Neiti: '(Haflíði) sagði þetta enga **sómd** fyrir víg Hneitis ok kallar þau gert hafa vandalaust til sín ok kvaðst meiri **sómd** hafa þeim fyrir hugat'. (He said that this was no redress for the killing of Neiti, and that they had acted rashly and that he would have ensured a better redress for them. Chap M7)

When the men of the cloth mediate between the two protagonists, there are frequent references to a sense of honour. The priests remind both of them that their opponent is a highly respected man, and they appeal to the sense of honour of both men. When Haflidi is lying in ambush with his men to attack Thorgils, bishop Thorlak urges him to go home out of respect for the mass of John the Baptist: 'ef þú lætr fyrir farast þetta á þessari hátíðinni um friðinn, at guð muni þér ok sá kappi Jón baptisti **sómahlutarins** unna í málunum' (if you withdraw on this saint's day for the sake of peace, then God and his warrior John will grant you an honourable part [*sómahlutr*] in this case. Chap 22) Here honour is associated with refraining from an attack and honouring the saint's day instead.

The priest Gudmund Brandsson is presented as Thorgils's nephew and a good friend of Haflidi. He visits them both to mediate when the conflict is at the breaking point. He says he will support the one who shows most respect (*virðing*) for his words (Chap 19). First he talks to Haflidi to ask him to proceed cautiously to prevent people getting hurt: 'ok ger svá vel, at þú **far varliga, ok gæt virðingar þinnar ok sóma**' (and be wise and proceed cautiously and take care of your reputation [*virðing*] and your honour [*sómi*].) Here the priest expresses the notion that Haflidi can best protect his honour by showing restraint.

Then Gudmund goes to Thorgils and asks him what he will do. Thorgils answers that he will confront Haflidi's forces and defend himself. Gudmund says that people would think he had behaved as a great man (*allmikilmannliga*) if he confined himself to protecting his property: «En ef þu ferr með þann ofsa, sem í einskis manns dómi er, þá uggi ek, at þú mótir ofsanum ok ofrkappinu, áðr lýkr málum ykkrum Haflíða» (but if you proceed with a savagery (*ofsi*) that has no parallel, I am afraid you will meet savagery (*ofsinn*) and arrogance before the conflict between you and Haflidi is over.)

The turning point comes when the priest Ketil tells a story from his own life that Haflidi could learn from (Chap 29). As a young man, Ketil had found a good wife in Groa, bishop Gissur's daughter. But there were rumours that she had a relationship with another man, Gudmund Grimsson. Driven by jealousy, Ketil attacked Gudmund, but is worse off for the encounter. Gudmund sticks a knife in his eye and blinds him. Ketil serves Gudmund with a summons for this:

Ok þá er svá var komit, þá buðu þeir fé fyrir málit. Þá hugða ek at, hvat mér hafði at borizt eða hversu allt hafði tekizt þungliga, ok neitta ek fébótunum. Ok sá ek þá, at þat eitt var hjálpráðit til, at skjóta málinu á guðs miskunn, því at allt tókst þá áðr oðru þungligar til **mannvirðingar** um mitt ráð. Ok ek sagða **ofrkapp** vera ok **metnað** Møðrvellinga, hvé þung heift mér myndi vera. Fann ek þá þat, alls ek hugða þá at **mannvirðinginni**, at ekki myndi þær bótr fyrir koma, er myndi at **sómd** verða. Gerða ek þá fyrir guðs sakir at gefa honum upp allt málit. Vissa ek, at þá mynda ek þat fyrir taka, er mér væri haldkvæmst. Ok bauð ek honum til mín, ok var hann með mér lengi síðan. Ok þá snerist þegar orðrómrinn ok með **virðing** manna, ok lagðist mér síðan hvern hlutr meir til gæfu ok **virðingar** en áðr. Ok vænti ek ok af guði, at þér muni svá fara. (Chap 29)

[And when it had come so far, they offered me money (fé) for the case. I thought about what had happened to me and how difficult everything had become, and I didn't accept the fines. And then I understood that the only advice that could help was to leave the case to God's mercy, because so far I had only experienced adversity as far as my situation (ráð) and reputation (mannvirðing) were concerned. And I saw that it was because of the arrogance (ofrkapp) and ambition (metnað) of the Modruvellings that hate had such a hold on me. When I thought of my reputation (mannvirðing), I understood that not all the fines in the world could give me redress (sómd). So I dropped the case, for the sake of God. I knew that in return I would receive what was in my

best interests. And the gossip immediately turned and with it my reputation (virðing manna), and everything turned to more advantage for my happiness and honour (virðing) than before. And I anticipate from God that the same will happen for you.]

Instead of accepting the fines, Ketil chose to waive his claim and seek reconciliation with Gudmund. In this way he achieved a much better redress and his life improved. So it is reconciliation and Christian humility that grants Ketil honour. Revenge or fines could not grant him the honour and redress he sought. Thus the concept of honour has acquired a new content.

## CONCLUSION – A NEW CODE OF HONOUR

Gisli and the two rivals Thorgils and Haflidi have a lot in common. They are all heroes in the sense that they initially enjoy a good reputation, they don't seek conflicts but are drawn into them due to their loyalty to the code of honour. *Gisli Surs-son's saga* ends tragically. The hero's steadfastness gains him honour according to the old code of honour but at the same time brings calamity on him and his family. Thorgils' and Haflidi's rivalry and loyalty to the old code of honour brings them too to the brink of disaster. But here the Church mediates and the wise Haflidi understands that there is another solution to the conflict: reconciliation. At the end of the saga we are left in no doubt that more honour is to be gained from Christian reconciliation than from revenge and fines. *The saga of Thorgils and Haflidi* ends happily. After reconciliation the two rivals emerge strengthened from the conflict and with more honour than they had before. But the honour gained under the auspices of Christianity has a different content and different conditions to the honour of the clan society.

An examination of the terminology of honour used in the two sagas clearly shows the function of honour as a motivator of actions. However, it is surprising to see how reticent the narrator is in using terms of honour when referring to Gisli. Instead Gisli's opponents are showered with terms of disgrace. The author of *The saga of Thorgils and Haflidi* is more generous with terms of honour. Honour is the chief motivator of action here too, but in the end the concept of honour is filled with new, Christian content. The same terms that according to the old code of honour were associated with revenge and violence are now filled with such Christian as peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Both the sagas we have examined were written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and we can suppose that they targeted the same audience, or at least the same mentality. In a

sense they reflect and support each other, in that both throw a critical light on the old code of honour. Both express the notion that clan society's concept of honour belongs in the past and must be replaced by a new ethical standard, founded on the message of the Church. *Gisli Sursson's saga* shows the tragic results that may come from not realising this, while *The saga of Thorgils and Haflidi* provides an example to be followed.

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