

## Revenge and Moderation: The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland<sup>1</sup>

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### *Introduction*

Although the New Testament clearly prohibits Christians from taking personal revenge, Christian societies—whether in first-century Palestine, medieval Europe, or contemporary North America—have always found this a difficult prohibition to observe, and, indeed, individuals and institutions have often cited other parts of the Bible to legitimise vengeful acts. This article considers the changing attitudes to clerical and secular vengeance in medieval Iceland. It adduces evidence from a range of legal, political, and ecclesiastical documents to contextualise a study of the representation of revenge in family and contemporary sagas in the light of ecclesiastical precepts. The analysis points to a growing perception that secular revenge must be tempered with moderation, and that clerics should not involve themselves in acts of vengeance. Within the sagas, religious figures are employed variously as the voice of the Church, and as those implicated in the turmoil of the *Sturlunga öld*.

### *Revenge and Reconciliation: A Context*

T. M. Andersson concludes his landmark study 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas' by stating that:

What gives a consistency to the ethical temper of these sagas is precisely a sense of proportion and moderation. They are written against excess [. . .] or they are written in praise of moderation [. . .] Most other sagas [. . .] conform to the same ideal.<sup>2</sup>

A more nuanced approach is that of Uecker, who also sees in the saga corpus, however, a tendency toward moderation and reconciliation (*Maßvollen, Angemessenen, Versöhnung*).<sup>3</sup> In the course of his discussion of his four groups of sagas, Uecker speaks of those, like *Þorsteins saga hvíta*, which deal with magnanimity, forgiveness, and a will to reconciliation. *Vápnfirðinga saga* also, in his view, validates the impulse toward reconciliation, not the ethic of revenge:

Die Versöhnung triumphiert, nicht die Rache, der Wille zum Ausgleich ist stärker als der Drang zur gewaltsamen Auseinandersetzung. (84)

[Reconciliation, not vengeance, triumphs; the will toward equilibrium is stronger than the urge toward violent confrontation.]

Although Uecker traces similar themes of reconciliation through texts such as *Þorsteins þáttir stangarhöggs*, *Droplaugarsonar saga*, *Gunnars þáttir Þiðrandabana*, *Bjarnar saga Hítðælakappa*, *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Reykðæla saga*, and *Valla-Ljóts saga*, he does not attempt to homogenise these disparate texts like Andersson, rather recognising that, though reconciliation and *das rechte Maß* play a significant role in all such sagas, the themes do not always carry the same weight, and there are different motives for reconciliation such as pragmatic political reasons (86-7). His conclusion does not come to a decision about where this theme comes from—he suggests that it could stem from Christian values, or represent a critique of the contemporary chieftains of the thirteenth century, or even 'eine literarisch fixierte Gegenposition zur Heldendichtung' (87) [a position fixed in literature in opposition to the heroic poetry].

### *Political, Legal, and Religious Attitudes to Revenge*

There is, in fact, a tendency in some critical saga studies to speak of texts such as *Brennu-Njáls saga* as depicting the change from the old, pagan ethic of revenge to the new, Christian ethic of forgiveness and grace.<sup>4</sup> However, this conception cannot always be supported by the texts themselves, as is shown below. First, however, this article addresses some of the evidence for contemporary society's attitudes to revenge, as seen in the arenas of politics, law, and religion. This material both supports and complicates the above interpretation of the revenge

## *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

ethic in the sagas, and paves the way for the analysis of individual saga texts which follows.

### *Christian Revenge?*

One might expect the Icelandic Church's attitude to revenge to follow that of the Bible, perhaps based on such passages as in Romans 12:19, where the Apostle Paul (quoting Deuteronomy 32:35) says:

Revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place unto wrath, for it is written: Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, this seems to be the attitude in parts of the *Homilubók*:

Dominus let eige hefna sín ne veria sic þa es hann vas hondlaþr. oc bunden af gyþingom. heldr grødde hann eyra þræls eins er petrus hafþe af hogvet... hversom megom vér verþa liþer crists. ef vér georom oss aþra goto en hann geck fyrer.<sup>6</sup>

[The Lord did not let himself be avenged nor defended when he was seized and bound by the Jews. Rather he healed the ear of a certain slave which Peter had cut off [. . .] How can we become Christ's followers, if we take a different path from the one he took?]

Here, Christ's behaviour serves as an *exemplum* for Christians, and forgiveness and kindness, not revenge, is what is expected of the Christian. However, the picture is inevitably much more complicated than this in medieval Iceland and Scandinavia. That revenge will be exercised to some degree is taken for granted in secular Norse texts.

### *Revenge in the Konungs skuggsjá*

The authoritative 'Father' of the mid-thirteenth-century *Konungs skuggsjá* recognises that revenge is in certain circumstances inevitable, and is most concerned that it should achieve its aims efficiently:

En þu at navzynligar sacar þreyngve þec til uspectar þa gersc þu  
eigi braðr ihemdom fyrr en þu ser at uel uerði framgengt ok þar  
come niðr sem maklect er.<sup>7</sup>

[But though necessary causes press you to strife, do not take  
revenge hastily before you see that it will succeed well and come  
down where it is deserved.]

However, later on, in the context of advice on wisdom, Father urges  
circumspection:

æf þær sannaz oc kæmr til þin hæfnder firir at vinna þa hæfn  
mæðr hofi oc sannsyni en æigi mæðr illgiarnligri akefð.<sup>8</sup>

[if [rumours of slander] prove true and it comes to you to avenge  
it, then take revenge with moderation and equity, but not with ill-  
willed vehemence.]

A fuller study of revenge in the whole of the *Konungs skuggsjá* reveals that  
revenge is considered to be unacceptable if taken by justly exiled subjects against  
their lord (p. 53), including Lucifer and the fallen angels (p. 80), or by foolish  
kinsmen who are aggrieved at not getting as much compensation for a greedy or  
quarrelsome relative as for a kinsman who was both wise and peaceful (p. 54).<sup>9</sup>

Vengeance is, however, approved if it is carried out by God—for instance,  
against the rebellious angels (p. 85), the greedy and unjust (p. 102), or those who  
die in a state of sin, as Hezekiah fears he may (p. 91)—or a representative  
sanctioned by Him, such as a king. Father justifies this by arguing that fear of  
punishment is an effective deterrent (p. 107). The king, however, cannot act with  
impunity—King David takes revenge (*hæfnd*) on the slayers of Ishbosheth, saying  
they have committed *niðings værc*, 'a vile deed', in slaying their lord, and his  
punishment is implicitly commended (§62, p. 107). However, his predecessor  
Saul's rejection occurs because he carries out the vengeance he is charged to  
wreak upon the Amalekites in a way not sanctioned by God (§63, p. 109f.). David  
twice refuses to harm the rejected Saul, saying first that he has no (implicitly  
justifiable) revenge to take for kinsmen ('faður [. . .] ne bræðra ne ængara annarra  
[. . .] frænda', §63, p. 113), and that it is God's place to deprive Saul of the  
kingship, and not David in 'avaricious boldness' (*agirndligri dirfð*, p. 113). The  
second statement is even more revealing in its implications:

### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

þar sœm ec a hvarki at minnaz til hœmnda við hann storra rana ne frænda latz nema þeira æinna at hann hæfir reinsat land mæð rettre ræfsing. oc er þat hvarki mitt oc ænskis annars rett værk at hæfna þæss. (p. 114)

[since I do not have to remember to avenge upon him either great plundering or loss of kinsmen, except those [things] alone when he cleansed the land with just punishment—and it is neither my nor any other's just work to avenge that.]

Thus, one may conclude that revenge under certain circumstances for loss of land, possessions, or kinsmen, is conceivable. A king's revenge against ambitious rivals is likewise implicitly sanctioned (as Solomon's against Adonijah, p. 119), but if the king takes the law into his own hands and kills out of hatred, it is considered *mandrap* as with anyone else, and he is liable to *svara* [. . .] *firi guði*, 'answer [. . .] before God' (p. 124).

Since much of this seems particularly relevant to Christian kings, we may return finally to the second passage quoted in this section, where circumspection is advised in the taking of revenge. Immediately previous to this statement, the Father says

Ef þu ert æinum hværium reiðr firir noccors konar fiandskap eða sakar þa rannzaka vandliga ihugþocca þinum fyrr en þu leitir hæfnda hværso mykel soc er eða hværso mikillar hæfndar su soc er værð. (p. 66)

[If you are angry with any individual for some kind of enmity or lawsuit, then carefully search your disposition before you seek vengeance [as to] how great a matter it is, or how great a revenge this offence is worth.]

It is therefore clear that though the authoritative speaker of the *Konungs skuggsjá*, at least, sees revenge as inevitable and indeed commendable in certain circumstances of individual injury, he nonetheless urges caution and moderation.<sup>10</sup> However, it remains to be seen whether this attitude can be reconciled with the picture given by the extant law-codes of the period.

*Revenge in the Law-codes*

Since a complete study of vengeance in the Norse law-codes is impracticable here, I seek briefly to survey the contexts of the terms *hefna* (alt. *hemna*, *hæmna*), and *hefnd* (alt. *hæmd*) as used in the collection *Norges gamle love*.<sup>11</sup> These codes come from various periods and places, and any full study would have to examine in detail the evidence for Icelandic legal attitudes to vengeance.<sup>12</sup> However, it is evident that, as with any system of laws, the texts are influenced by, and often copy closely, the precedent and wording of those legal texts already extant, and it thus seems permissible to take the corpus as a whole as representative of prevailing legal attitudes to revenge, in a way not possible with other types of text. It should be remembered that law-codes are frequently not just prescriptive but also idealistic, rather than representing the actual historical situation, or describing accurately what was done in response to crimes.

The use of *hefna* / *hefnd* falls into only a few main groups. One can dismiss first the instances where they are employed merely as a synonym for punishment, as in *kononglige hemd*, 'kingly revenge'.<sup>13</sup> The second group of instances concern the avenging of certain criminals, which is universally condemned. *Gulathing* §178 states 'þat er oc niðings vig ef maðr hefñir þiova. syni með settar eiði' [It is also a base killing if a man avenges a thief—let him deny it with a sixfold oath].<sup>14</sup> The penalty is exile as an outlaw with no rights, and one may compare to this statute *Gulathingslov* §32, which lists criminals suffering permanent outlawry and forfeiture of all rights to property and peace, including

'þeir er hemnast þessara ubota manna. æða heimta giolld efter ef vitni veit þat'. [Those who avenge these irredeemable criminals, or claim compensation for them, if witnesses know it.]<sup>15</sup>

Conversely, those who defend themselves, their property or their kinswomen against these men are *friðhelger*, 'inviolable, protected by law', and need pay no compensation if they wound or kill the outlaws—*Frostathing* V, §45, repeats these statements.

*Bjarkö-Ret* §162 (and likewise *Frostathing* X, §35) reveals the great importance and power of words, providing a detailed list of payments to be made to men of various ranks if they are compared *við berendi*, 'to a female animal'. Calling a man *sannsorðinn*, 'buggered' demands full atonement

*The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

(*fullrétti*), but comparison to a male animal necessitates only half atonement (*hálfarétti*), and the statute ends:

En ef menn mælast illa við eða geyast. þá skal orð orðs hefna.  
(*NGL* I 333)  
[But if men speak ill of each other or abuse each other, then shall  
word avenge word.]

The Gulathing code speaks of two occasions when it is 'good' for someone to be avenged. The first statute (§152) states 'ef maðr er i flokke vigginn. þa er vel ef hemt verðr' (*NGL* I 60) [If a man is slain in a crowd, then it is well that he be avenged]. It goes on to specify what should happen if the killer gets away—none must hinder his pursuit and capture, and if anyone does and is killed, then the fallen man is to be considered an outlaw, that is, he himself cannot be avenged because he obstructed vengeance for another. The second statute (§171) states:

Ef maðr vigr annan a skipi. þa er vel ef hans er hemt. æða  
utanborðz rundit mannbana. (*NGL* I 65)  
[If a man kills another on a ship, then it is well if he is avenged, or  
the man-slayer made to run overboard.]

The crew is permitted to take the killer to the shore, but no further, upon penalty of a fine. If they take him out to sea with them, they are outlawed with him, and anyone who refuses to row while he is on board cannot be punished if they report the situation to the first people they meet. These statutes presumably attempt to combat lawlessness in situations (in crowds, on board ship) which were difficult for authorities to control directly.

The introduction to the Frostathing code clarifies in detail the procedure in situations that were evidently proving complicated, sometimes through the abuse of legal loopholes. Section 6 of the introduction states that if a man wounds without reason, or an injury necessitates full atonement, but revenge is taken by the victim or his kinsmen before the offender can offer atonement, then the offender is still considered to be an outlaw, even if he is killed, because he *fyrri braut friðin*, 'broke the peace first', unless his is judged a special case. However, once he has offered full atonement, then anyone who kills him is punished with outlawry. Provision is made, however, for those who trust to their wealth or kinsmen to allow them to injure an innocent man a second time, and the victim

need only accept atonement if he wishes, and remains in the king's peace 'þó at hann hemni sín. hvárt sem hinn daur eða lifnar' (*NGL* I 122) [Though he avenges himself, whether the other lives or dies].

Similarly, section 8 of the introduction addresses a problem that had arisen, whereby a slain man's kinsmen would kill in revenge not the offender himself, but that member of the offender's family *er beztr er*, 'who is best, foremost', presumably because this would cause the family more harm and weaken its power base. Consequently, the offender was not punished for his crime, an innocent man suffered, and the country lost some of its *beztu þegna*, 'best thanes':

oc fyrir því leggium ver við þetta úbóta sök oc aleigumál hverium þeim sem hefnir á öðrum en þeim er drepa eða ræðr. (*NGL* I 123)  
[And therefore we designate this an irredeemable offence and an entire property case for the one who takes revenge on another than the one who kills or plans (the killing).]

This is comparable to the *Nyere By-Lov*, §3, which states 'Þat er oc niðings værk ef maðr hæfnizt a öðrum en þeim er gerer eða ræðr' (*NGL* II 212). [It is also a vile action if a man takes revenge on anyone other than the one who acts or plots.] Finally, section 5 of the introduction provides for the situation where a man outlawed for killing abuses the king's pardon by refusing to pay the remaining price of atonement after being permitted to remain in the land:

þá megu frændr hins dauða hefna á honum. þó at hann sé sátttr við konung. svá at þeir verði eigi útlægir þó at þeir drepri hann. (*NGL* I 122)  
[Then the kinsmen of the dead man may take revenge on him although he is reconciled with the king, such that they will not become outlaws though they kill him.]

Similarly, the law already allowed a man to kill another who had unlawful sex with a woman of his immediate family, thus dishonouring him. In section 7 of the introduction, however, the Frostathing law further states that, if the offender refuses to defend himself against any legal action 'þá verðr hvárgi útlagr þó at hinn hefniz þeirrar scammar' (*ibid.*) [Then there will be no outlawry, though that one (the offended man) avenges himself for the disgrace].



### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

This might seem to indicate an attitude more of tolerance than enthusiasm for legal compensation, with the default feeling being that, if compensation or the law is not providing satisfaction, revenge is there to turn to—possibly borne out by *Gulathing* §186, which warns 'Nu a engi maðr rett a sér oftarr en þrýsvar. hvarke karl. ne kona. ef hann hemnisc eigi a milli' (*NGL* I 68) [No one has a claim to redress more often than three times, neither man nor woman, if he does not avenge himself in between]. Monetary compensation was becoming increasingly more acceptable as the wergeld system developed, but revenge was evidently still an ever-present thought in some minds.

The growing complexity of this situation, where recourse was sometimes had to revenge, sometimes to compensation, is epitomised by a long passage in King Magnús Hákonsson's *Nyere Landslov*, paralleled almost word for word in *Jónsbók* chapter 21 and the *Nyere By-Lov* §21, and shows clearly an attempt to bring the alternation of offence and revenge under due legal process and the control of the king's officials.<sup>16</sup> Careful provision is made against official neglect, or corruption, and a pragmatic view is taken of the taking of personal revenge if legal justice is not brought about. There is a very clear sense that an offence requires the appropriate retribution, preferably a legally controlled and reasoned fine, but, if that should not be forthcoming, then an equal act of revenge. This sense is the same as that in *Hertug Haakon Magnussöns store Retterbod for Hedemarken og Thoten* §6, which states that, if revenge is taken by innocent victims, 'ok værðær hæmden æi mæiri en hin hafde til gort aðr. þa skal sa vera saklaus er hæmdizst sin' (*NGL* III 21) [And no more revenge occurs than that one had done before, then that one shall be guiltless who avenges himself].

Finally, in this survey of these secular law-codes, a statement in King Magnús Hákonsson's *Hirðskrá* (*Hirðskraa*) provides a close parallel to one of those quoted from the *Konungs skuggsiá*, stating:

Þo at þer misliki [nokor lutr þa ver [æighi braðr hælld(r) forseall  
huat hæfnd [er þu at að væita eða huerium oc at æigi værðe  
ofhæfnt [eða a uverðugum. (*NGL* II 418, §28)

[Though some thing displeases you then be not hasty, rather  
prudent (as to) what revenge you have to inflict, or on whom, and  
(such) that it is not excessively avenged or undeservedly.]

Again, the greatest importance is placed on moderation and a sense of justice based on equality of crime and punishment. We see in these examples of

sanctioned and unjustified revenge in both political and secular legal texts the various distinctions that medieval Christianised Scandinavians were able to draw with regard to this subject. These texts, however, refer primarily to individual, secular revenge—it is a different matter when it comes to the involvement of clerics in vengeance and litigation.

### *Revenge in the Church*

Orri Vésteinsson's recent detailed study *The Christianization of Iceland* makes very clear how the early period in the Icelandic Church saw the gradual disentanglement of ecclesiastical and secular power.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of the period, clerics were heavily involved in legal prosecutions and the overseeing of fighting, or even participated in fighting themselves. Orri details the legal dealings of Bishop Klængr Þorsteinsson (1152-76), who, in 1160, was asked to arbitrate between Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammur and Einarr Þorgilsson in Staðarhóll. Bishop Klængr took the part of Einarr, his second cousin, with whose sister he had had an affair. However, when in 1170 the enmity was still unabated, Bishop Brandr stepped in to arbitrate, this time taking the part of Sturla, his first cousin once removed. Brandr was heavily involved in politics and arbitration. In 1190, he had seized control of a church-farm because the owner died and he deemed the sons incapable of taking over. By 1200, the sons felt they were old enough to take charge, but Brandr refused to relinquish control, and they asked Chieftain Qgmundr *sneis* to help them occupy the farmstead and prepare for battle. Bishop Brandr assembled a force, which marched on the church-farm under the command of his grandson Kolbeinn Arnórsson and Hafr Brandsson (possibly his illegitimate son). The fighting was averted, but this does indicate the way that bishops were functioning much like chieftains at this period. Reform began under Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161-88), although it was only at the very end of the twelfth century that the offices of chieftain and priest began fully to separate.<sup>18</sup>

Eysteinn's archiepiscopal letter of *circa* 1173 clearly and specifically attempts to remove clerics from the field of legal prosecution, and even retributive violence. He states:

Nu kenne menn aller. þeir sem menn hafa drepit. þa fyrbyð ek  
þeim Guds þionostv giord. fra hinne fystu uigslu til ennar efstu.  
og framleidis fyrbyð ek ollum ken[n]e monnum soknar mal. aa

### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

hendur sier at taka nema orvqssum frændvm sinvm. eda bqrnvm.  
fðdvr lausvm. eda konum verndarlausum. og þo felausvm. og fyri  
gudz saker.<sup>19</sup>

[Now (with regard to) all clerics, those who have killed men, I forbid them God's services, from the first consecration to the last, and further I forbid all clerics to prosecute lawsuits (lit. take into their own hands) except on behalf of their aged kinsmen, or children, orphans, or defenceless women, and even then (they must do it) without money, and for God's sake.]

However, immediately following this, the archbishop makes it clear that violence against clerics by laymen will not be tolerated, such acts not being susceptible to absolution except by intervention of the Pope or archbishop.

hverr er sa j gudz banne og papans er misþyrmer kenne manni med  
heiptugri hendi. og ma hvergi lavsn taka vm drap. eda afhog[g]  
ken[n]e manz eda mungs. nema þar sem papinn er. (DI i 222)

[each one is under the interdict of God and of the Pope who maltreats clerics with a vengeful hand, and none may take absolution for the killing or striking of a cleric or monk, except where the Pope is concerned.]

Nevertheless, it is apparent that these reforms took time to have an impact, if indeed they were ever wholly successful. Both Orri Vésteinsson and Jón Jóhannesson are sceptical about the effectiveness of the reforms, and this is borne out by the later archiepiscopal letters. Around 1179, Archbishop Eysteinn had to write again, this time to support Bishop Þorlákr's institutions, which apparently were being disregarded because of the fact that they were new laws (*helldur til nymælis*, p. 259). Then, around 1180, Eysteinn writes not only to the bishops, but also to the chieftains Jón Loptsson and Gizurr Hallsson, making it clear that clerics should not bear arms, but that the chieftains should be supporting the discipline of the bishops (DI i, pp. 262-4).

Change had still not occurred by 1189, when Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson (1189-1205) felt he had to repeat his predecessor's instructions. He writes to Bishops Þorlákr and Brandr that 'Kenne menn bere eigi vopn. og skulv vera fridsamer vit olærda menn' (DI i 288f.) [Clerics should not bear weapons, and should be peaceful toward laymen]. He also re-emphasises that clerics should not

litigate on behalf of anyone other than defenceless relatives. His following letter also repeats directions about clerical immunity, and forbids ecclesiastical involvement in violence and litigation (*DI* i, pp. 290-1).

Orri Vésteinsson suggests that these archiepiscopal letters of the late twelfth century only began to have their effect in the thirteenth century, when it gradually came to be perceived that clerics were 'benevolent and trustworthy', and increasingly involved in reconciliation.<sup>20</sup> However, in this context one must also take account of the work of Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir and Sverrir Jakobsson. The former shows that canon law and the Niðarós diocese were bringing to bear strong influence on the Icelandic church in this period, and that canon law instigated certain changes in judicial matters such as the legal protection of individuals being taken over by official institutions.<sup>21</sup> The latter places the archiepiscopal directives in the context of the European *Pax Dei* movement of the tenth and eleventh century, encouraging physical immunity for those who did not carry arms.<sup>22</sup>

The implication of the evidence just surveyed, therefore, is that clerics up until this period were heavily involved in all kinds of violence and litigation. When we turn to the sagas, whether *Íslendinga sögur* or *samtíðar sögur*, a fuller picture emerges of what kind of situation the archbishops may have been addressing. One must of course always remember that the balance between historicity and fictionality within both kinds of saga texts is very variable, and it is not in fact my intention to claim a direct relation to actuality for the discussion which follows. Rather it will serve as a window onto the world-view of certain Icelandic saga authors, focussing particularly on their perceptions of the interaction of ecclesiastical and secular authorities in the matter of revenge.

### *Clerics and Revenge in the Family Sagas*

In chapter 49 of *Laxdæla saga*, Kjartan throws down his weapons so that Bolli can slay him, in a gesture sometimes compared to those of medieval Christian martyrs: 'Síðan kastaði Kjartan vápnum ok vildi þá eigi verja sik, en þó var hann lítt sárr, en ákafliga vígmóðr' [Then Kjartan cast down his weapons and would not defend himself, and yet he was little wounded, but terribly weary from fighting].<sup>23</sup> Richard North points out, however, that the action can be seen in a very different light: 'Kjartan taunts Bolli to attack him, so he can watch Bolli incur the *níð* [. . .] It is to cause the ultimate injury, not to forgive, that Kjartan throws down his sword'.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

The author of *Njáls saga*, too, is sometimes seen as validating the new Christian way of peace in contradistinction to the old heathen way of vengeance (famously exemplified by the conduct of Hallr of Síða, who, in the interests of peace, waives both revenge and compensation for his son's killing). Lars Lönnroth, for instance, argues that the author of *Njáls saga* had grown up with the older law-code *Grágás*, but was influenced by the later *Járnsíða*. According to Lönnroth, the narrator quotes the old law, but makes the ones who respect it either Christians or noble heathens 'acting in the spirit of the new law by taking revenge only when they were prompted by justice, atoning for their sins like any good Catholic, sometimes even abstaining from seeking legal compensation when higher interests were at stake'.<sup>25</sup>

However, one must place this against *Njáls saga* chapter 129, where Njáll refuses to leave his burning farmstead at least in part because he can neither avenge his sons nor live in shame, however martyrlike other aspects of his death may seem. He says:

'Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm'.

[I do not wish to go out, for I am an old man and little equipped to avenge my sons, and I do not wish to live in shame.]<sup>26</sup>

Further, in the same saga, Ámundi *inn blindi*, 'the blind', is miraculously awarded his sight for just long enough to avenge his father with an axe in the head of his slayer. Lýtingr has refused to pay him compensation, and Ámundi says that if he could see, he would have 'annathvart fyrir föður minn fébætr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!' (ch. 106, p. 273) [Either compensation or blood-revenge for my father, and so may God judge between us!] Immediately, his eyes open, and he cries 'Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill' [Praised be God, my Lord! It can now be seen what he wishes]. After Ámundi has killed Lýtingr, his eyes close once more, 'ok var hann all ævi blindr síðan' [and he was blind all his life afterwards]. It could be argued that, in choosing to take revenge rather than the other option he mentions, compensation, Ámundi has misinterpreted God's will and his subsequent blindness is a punishment of his vengeance. However, it is equally possible that the quick succession of events—prayer, miracle, revenge, then blindness once more—implies that divine intervention was necessary to restore the 'correct' state of affairs, and that blindness is merely Ámundi's normal state, not a judgement upon him—he

certainly is not represented as complaining about his lot, only as celebrating his chance to restore equity.

Hildigunnr's inciting of Flosi in *Njáls saga* chapter 116, mentioned above, further complicates the matter. She tells him:

Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek sœri þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir manndóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns níðingr ella. (p. 291)

[I call God and all good men to witness that I adjure you with all the powers of your Christ and your manhood and manliness, that you avenge all those wounds which (Hǫskuldr) had upon him when dead, or else be called every man's *níðingr*.]

Flosi's oft-quoted retort *eru kǫld kvenna ráð*, 'cold are the counsels of women' (p. 292), and the insistent personal deixis in Hildigunnr's speech (*Krists þíns; karlmennsku þína*) foreground gender in this episode, and it is clear that Hildigunnr is enlisting the authority of the male, Christian God in her quest for vengeance.<sup>27</sup>

Although it might seem that she represents the 'old way of vengeance', kept alive by women, she equally evidently does not associate the Christian God with an ethic of forgiveness. This is a point in the saga, nonetheless, where the relationship between Christianity, vengeance and gender is less than clear, abetted by the traditional external focalisation of the saga narrative—the author avoiding explicit intrusion which might guide the reader's judgement.

A full analysis of Christianity and revenge in *Njáls saga* would demand a book in itself. In *Njála*, however, it does seem that God may not always be averse to individuals taking vengeance. Certainly there is no clear denunciation of 'just' revenge, and, in fact, the family sagas often present a similarly mixed attitude to revenge in a Christian context.

In *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjara*, Þorvaldr kills two men who have composed an obscene poem about him and the bishop, implying that they have had sexual relations and the bishop has borne Þorvaldr's children. However, when Þorvaldr tells the bishop about the killing, the latter rebukes him. Þorvaldr gives as his excuse that he 'þolda eigi, at þeir kölluðu okkr raga' [Could not endure that they called us queer].<sup>28</sup> However, the bishop replies that he should

### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

have taken the words as meaning merely that the bishop had carried Þorvaldr's children around, saying:

Eigi skyldi kristinn maðr leita at hefna sín sjálf, þó at hann væri smáðr hatrliga, heldr at þola fyrir guðs sakir brigzli ok meingörðir vándra manna.

[A Christian man should not seek to avenge himself, though he might be reviled hatefully—rather suffer for God's sake the reproach and offences of wicked men.]

Later, Heðinn—a man who spoke out effectively against the bishop's preaching, leading to the utterance of the slanderous poem already mentioned—puts into the same harbour as Þorvaldr, and the latter takes a slave into the forest where they know Heðinn to be, ordering the slave to kill Heðinn. When the bishop is told, he informs Þorvaldr that they must part: 'því at þú vilt seint láta af manndrápum' (ibid., p. 300) [Because you will be slow to leave off man-slaying]. Bishop Friðrekr goes to Saxony, and we are told that he dies there with *heilageik* ('holiness')—an implicit commendation of his rigid line on vengeance and killing.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, in *Knýtlinga saga* chapter 96, Archbishop Qzurr addresses Eiríkr's troops before the impending battle: 'Nú er sú skript mín, at ek býð yðr í guðs nafni, at þér gangið fram karlmannliga ok berizk djarfliga' [Now this is my penance, that I command you in God's name that you go forth in manly fashion and bear yourselves boldly].<sup>30</sup> Eiríkr immediately follows the archbishop's speech with an exhortation of his men, ending: 'Má oss hugkvæmt vera, hvers at hefna er' [We must be mindful of what there is to avenge].<sup>31</sup> The implication is, thus, that the archbishop is underwriting this revenge—and, indeed, (*í guðs nafni*) bestowing God's blessing upon it, although admittedly soldiers taking revenge is different from a cleric doing so himself.

Still another attitude is shown in *Ljósvetninga saga* chapter 20, where Þorvaldr Hqskuldsson wants to avenge his brother upon hearing of his death on his way back from Rome. Þorvaldr has presumably been on a pilgrimage, and declares: 'Ok verði nú sem Pétur postoli vill. Ætla ek þó, at betra væri, at ek kæma eigi út aprt' [And let it now happen as the Apostle Peter wishes. I think, though, that it would be better that I did not come back to Iceland].<sup>32</sup> He suddenly develops severe eye pain, dies, and is thus prevented from taking a revenge which is implicitly both desired, but also perceived as sinful.

These passages—just a few of those which might be cited in this connexion—serve to highlight the far from consistent attitudes to the involvement of Christians and clerics in revenge evinced in the family sagas and associated *þættir*.

*Clerics and Revenge in the Contemporary Sagas*

The *Sturlunga saga* compilation as a whole, by the use of theme and the process of compilation itself, foregrounds the necessity of moderation and mediation, lest the violence of the Age of the Sturlungs bring Iceland to ruin.<sup>33</sup> Within this broader context, however, it is possible to draw out separate strands of narrative that create a picture of the complex of attitudes which must have prevailed according to individuals' different understandings of the place of vengeance in Christian society, reflected by their differing educational, theological and spiritual experience.<sup>34</sup> And if in the *Íslendinga sögur* revenge is often condoned or exercised by Christians, in the *samtíðar sögur* contained in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation one finds numerous examples of priests and clergy taking part in revenge attacks, or killing opponents. The beginning of *Þorgils saga ok Haflíði* features a notable heir to the violently irascible Þangbrandr in the vengeful priest Már Guðmundsson, who steals from and finally kills Óláfr Hildisson, although his conduct is frowned upon.<sup>35</sup> One of the more notable unions of at least nominal Christianity and revenge, however, is found in chapter 44 of *Íslendinga saga*, in a verse attributed to Guðmundr *skáld*:

Stórlátr hefir Sturla,  
— stendr hrafn á ná jafnan,  
Kristr ræðr tír ok trausti —,  
Tuma hefndir vel efndar.

[Proud-minded Sturla has—the raven always stands on the corpse: Christ rules over glory and protection—fulfilled vengeance well for Tumi.]<sup>36</sup>

As Peter Hallberg comments: 'The Prince of Peace has been assigned a place in the ideology of the blood-feud, and has been made to take over the old war-god Óðinn's bird, the black guardian spirit of the battlefield.'<sup>37</sup> We may note that immediately before this Bishop Guðmundr *bað guð hefna sín*, 'asked God to



avenge him' (*Íslendinga saga*, p. 293)—that is, both parties are invoking God on their side, expecting divine aid in battle.

A more nuanced approach to revenge can be seen in *Þorgils saga skarða*. In chapter 17, when Þorgils asks Sturla for quarter, Hrafn interjects, saying that Sturla cannot give it, and will rather give him the same degree of quarter he intended to give his kinsman Sturla.<sup>38</sup> The narrator tells that Óláfr Þórðarson then told Hrafn, Sturla and the rest that he intended to avenge the shame done to him and the church, continuing: 'Skal ek þess biðja almáttkan guð ok inn helga Nicholaum biskup, er staðinn á, at hann hefni yðr sinni misgerða...' (p. 130f.) [I shall pray to Almighty God and the holy Bishop Nikulaus, who holds the place, that he avenge upon you your misdeeds]. Here, God is being invoked in a feud between kinsmen, and not just on one side.

Later in the same chapter, Þorgils muses:

'Ek hugsa þat [. . .] hvé illt mér þykkir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þrýtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefnileið róit um svivirðing þá, er mér er nú ger'. (p. 132)

[I was thinking [. . .] how ill it will seem to me, if no saga shall be current about me before my life runs out, such that I cannot set out upon the way of vengeance for that dishonour which is now done to me.]

That is, he wishes to take vengeance lest, in not doing so, his life be unworthy of posthumous fame. However, Þórðr replies:

'Ger eigi þat í hug þér. Ger þá sem þér sýnist, ef þú þiggr líf, en ef þú skalt nú deyja, þá er þér því betra, sem þú átt færum ábyrgðum at svara.'

[Do not have that in your mind. Do what you think fit if you receive your life, but if you must die now, then it will be the better for you, the less responsibility you have to answer for.]

There is a consciousness that present actions of revenge, however satisfying, may have eternal consequences—even thinking about revenge or wishing one could take it is a dangerous indulgence when one is about to die. Nevertheless, the implication of Þórðr's advice is that, if Þorgils in fact does not die, he can then resume thoughts of revenge, and even carry them out, presumably with the intention of repenting later, a pragmatic approach to religion.

That Icelandic religious leaders were not supposed to take revenge seems to be implied in chapter 44 of *Þorgils saga*, where Þorgils is planning to help Þorvarðr attack Hrafn and Eyjólftr, and asking Abbot Brandr's advice as to how he should proceed. He at once makes it clear that: 'mér er þat bannat at eiga nökkurn hlut í mannráðum eða nökkurs kyns ófriði' (p. 174) [It is forbidden for me to have any part in plots against men's lives or any kind of hostilities].<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, it is very evident how hard he finds it to obey the church's constraints on clergy, both in his careful omitting to command Þorgils *not* to act, and in his demeanour as he leaves the scene:

Spratt ábóti þá upp ok bað, at verða skyldi guðs vili. Mæltu þá sumir menn, at honum hlypi kapp í kinn,—því at hann dreyrrauðr á at sjá ok mælti þetta, er hann gekk í brottu: 'Hart er þat, at vér skulim bera frændr vára göfga bótalausa fyrir bóndasonum, ok svá myndi þykkja Ormi, bróður mínum, ef hann lifði.' (*Þorgils saga skarða*, p. 175)

[The abbot then sprang up and bade that God's will should be done. Some men said then that zeal overcame him (lit. leapt into his cheek, i.e. flooded his face)—for he was blood-red to look at and said this, when he walked away: 'It is hard that we must bear our noble kinsmen (being) without compensation before the sons of farmers, and so it would seem to Ormr, my brother, if he lived'.]

This seems to indicate at least in some areas a policy whereby clerics themselves were not supposed to countenance or become involved in violent feuds and revenge, but had a certain amount of leeway to turn a blind eye to the actions of laymen.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, zealous churchmen (such as Bishop Friðrekr in *Þorvalds þáttur víðforla*) might still take a hard line even on revenge by laymen—perhaps citing Christ's non-violent stance of forgiveness in support of their exhortations, as in *Homiliubók*.

Finally, the office of priest has a double implication in chapter 18 of *Guðmundar saga dýra*, where Snorri Snorrason and Þorsteinn, his brother and a priest, are about to be executed. They are both ready to die, but Snorri asks to be killed before Þorsteinn: '[. . .] því at ek treystumst honum betr, at hann muni fyrirgefa yör, þótt hann sjái mik af lífi tekinn' [For I trust to him better that he will forgive you, even if he sees me put to death].<sup>41</sup> The implication is evidently that,

### *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

because Þorsteinn is a priest, he will forgive even the person he sees slay his own brother. Snorri, on the other hand, might not be able to endure this sight, and, presumably, wishes to die with a clean conscience and not with a thwarted desire for vengeance. The saga audience is then told that Hámundr Önundarson kills Snorri, but that his brother Vigfúss Önundarson did not want to kill Þorsteinn *er hann var prestur*, 'because he was a priest': in the end Starkaðr *inn seki*, 'the outlaw', kills him. Thus, the office of priest at this time is such that only an already marginal and ostracised criminal is willing to shoulder the responsibility for killing one. Significantly, in the same chapter, Þorgrímr prevents the killing of a woman and her male child (*sveinbarn*), saying: 'Hvárki skal hér vinna á börnum né konum, þótt sjá sveinn verði oss öllum at bana' (p. 199) [Neither women nor children shall be harmed here, even if this boy should become the slayer of us all].

Revenge is portrayed here as somewhat unpalatable, the avengers owing to scruples, and the threat of future vengeance or a feud is not a sufficient incentive to kill children. Although space forbids it here, the progressive entrenchment of religious attitudes, and the shift from a shame to a guilt culture, would repay close scrutiny in the historically transitional narratives of *Sturlunga saga*.

### *Conclusion*

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly what *did* happen with regard to the taking of revenge by the historical clergy of Iceland. None of the written sources we have provides unadulterated historical evidence: the family sagas are primarily literary works based on historical events, and the contemporary sagas also betray literary shaping and ideological bias. Sources such as the laws, homilies, and archiepiscopal letters deal with the subject only sporadically, and they are predominantly normative, rather than descriptive. Moreover, the texts come from different geographical and temporal spheres, and the historical practices are likely to have varied according to place and time. The main consideration, however, is that practice (as opposed to intention, or duty) most certainly will have varied from individual to individual, according to the degree of religious zeal, socio-political ambition, and personal circumstance. Thus, from the material adduced above, it is clear that, in historical matters as well as literary ones, it is imperative that one proceed only with caution from individual analyses of texts to general statements about society or a body of literature, since both are made up of individuals with differing ideological and literary concerns, and diverse

understandings of their society, its history and the ways in which they wish they were different.

It seems fair, nevertheless, to see a general perception in the sagas that, even in secular revenge, moderation is necessary, and that it is inappropriate for clerics to engage in violence and litigation. This corresponds with the evidence of the historical sources, which suggests a progression towards greater consistency in the Church's attitude to revenge: urging moderation in laymen and forgiveness and a degree of religious separation from secular affairs in clerics. Saga characters complying with this Christianising trend are depicted favourably, whereas those who do not, in general terms, are seen as a threat to society.

The sagas are not a homogenous body of texts, and generalisations about attitudes to revenge, such as those of Andersson quoted at the beginning of this article, seem less than satisfactory. Nevertheless, the analysis above suggests a general validation of a moderate approach to revenge in several different contexts, where the figure of the cleric in both family and contemporary sagas can feature not only as perpetrating or encouraging of revenge in clear contravention of ecclesiastical policy, but also as a voice exhorting Christian forgiveness.

## *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the following people who read this article in earlier forms: Heather O'Donoghue, Carl Phelpstead, Ármann Jakobsson, Siân Grönlie, Carolyne Larrington, Judy Quinn.

<sup>2</sup> T. M. Andersson, 'The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas', *Speculum* 45 (1970), 575-93 (p. 588).

<sup>3</sup> H. Uecker, 'Isländersaga contra Heldensage', *skandinavistik* 10 (1980), 81-8 (p. 83).

<sup>4</sup> Studies which fit this formulation either explicitly or implicitly include Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969), 1-29, and Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal'.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 12:19, quoted from *The Holy Bible: Douay Version, translated from the Latin Vulgate (Douay, A.D. 1609: Rheims, A.D. 1582)* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956); cf. Hebrews 10:30.

<sup>6</sup> *Homiliu-bók*, ed. by T. Wisén (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1872), p. 67 (italics omitted).

<sup>7</sup> *Konungs skuggsiá*, ed. by Ludwig Holm-Olsen, 2nd ed. *Norrøne tekster*, 1 (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskrift-Institut, 1983), p. 6. I have on occasions silently normalised the text.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 66; see Lars Lönnroth, 'The Noble Heathen', p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> See further, Sverre Bagge, *The Political Thought of The King's Mirror*. *Mediaeval Scandinavia Supplements*, 3 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1987), pp. 71-84.

<sup>10</sup> See Bagge, *Political Thought*, pp. 83-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Norges gamle Love indtil 1387*, ed. by R. Keyser, P. A. Munch, et al. 5 vols (Christiania: Grøndahl, 1846-1895) (hereafter *NGL*). The (un-normalised) Norse texts of the laws are cited from *NGL* by page and section number unless otherwise stated; translations are my own.

<sup>12</sup> Particularly important would be the evidence of *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, and the ways in which legal provisions here differ from those in *Grágás*. See *Íslendingabók*; *Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, 2 vols, *Íslenzk fornrit I* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968); and (for *Konungsbók*) *Grágás* [. . .] *efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift*, ed. by Vilhjálmur Finsen. *Nordiske Oldskrifter*, 11, 17, 21, 22, 32 (Kjøbenhavn: Brødrene Berlings Bogtrykkeri, 1852), §§ 86, 89, 90, 111; also (for the additions in *Staðarhólsbók*) *Grágás: efter det Arnarnagnæanske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fol. i Staðarhólsbók*, ed. Kommissionen for det Arnarnagnæanske Legat [i.e. Finsen] (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1879), §§ 265, 271, 293, 366-67.

<sup>13</sup> Compare *NGL* III 143, §60; also, p. 189, §100; IV 382, §13.

<sup>14</sup> *NGL* I 66; cf. §133, p. 56; also II 50, §3; II 212, §3.

<sup>15</sup> NGL I 19; cf. II 288, §X; II 52, §4.

<sup>16</sup> NGL II 66f., §20; *Jónsbók: Kong Magnus Hakonssons Lovbog for Island vedtaget paa Altinget 1281 og Réttarbætr de for Island givne Retterbøder af 1294, 1305 og 1314*, ed. by Ólafur Halldórsson (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1970), pp. 60-1; NGL II 222f.; cf. also the excerpt in NGL IV 153.

<sup>17</sup> Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> See Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga* (orig. pub. Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagið, 1956); trans. Haraldur Bessason: *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies, 2 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1974), pp. 186-90. Although archiepiscopal orders seem not to have been made law in Iceland, nevertheless 'there is no evidence of the assuming of priestly orders by a temporal chieftain after 1190', p. 190.

<sup>19</sup> *Diplomatarium Islandicum* (hereafter *DI*), i, ed. by Jón Sigurðsson (Kaupmannahöfn: S. L. Möller, 1857), p. 222. I have on occasion minimally normalised some of the texts.

<sup>20</sup> Orri Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland*, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, 'Um afskipti erkibiskupa af íslenzkum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld', *Saga* 20 (1982), 28-62.

<sup>22</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Friðarviðleitni kirkjunnar á 13. öld', *Saga* 36 (1998), 7-46, *passim*. Violent clerics were clearly a concern in late Anglo-Saxon England—see *Wulfstan's Canon Law Collection*, ed. by J. E. Cross and Andrew Hamer, Anglo-Saxon Texts, 1 (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999), §§ 75, 79, 83, 102, 159, 164-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson. Íslenzk fornrit V (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), p. 154. The comparison is made despite the fact that a more conventional martyr, such as Edmund in Ælfric's *Life of St Edmund*, refuses to fight from the beginning. See *Ælfric: Lives of Three English Saints*, ed. by G. I. Needham (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1976), p. 48f.

<sup>24</sup> Richard North, *Pagan Words and Christian Meanings* (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1991), p. 163f. North construes the *nið* as 'the attacking and then killing of a foster-brother and cousin' (p. 163), but the cowardice of attacking a defenceless man surely also enters into the disgrace Kjartan intends for Bolli.

<sup>25</sup> Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, Íslenzk fornrit XII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1954), p. 330.

<sup>27</sup> On the proverb, see Sarah M. Anderson's introduction to *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology*, ed. by Sarah M. Anderson, with Karen Swenson (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. xi-xvi; see also Carol J. Clover, 'Hildigunnr's lament,' in *Structure and*

## *The Church and Vengeance in Medieval Iceland*

*Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*, ed. by John Lindow et al (Odense: Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 141-83 (p. 145, n. 8).

<sup>28</sup> *Borvalds þáttur víðfjörðla*, in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. by Sigurður Nordal. 4 vols ([Reykjavík], Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944-1945), I 299.

<sup>29</sup> This is in stark contrast to the attitude of the notorious Bishop Þangbrandr, not considered in detail here for reasons of space. The episode has been compared to a similar one in Gregory of Tours (IV. 39) by Joaquín Martínez Pizarro: 'On *Níð* against Bishops', *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 11 (1978-9), 149-53. The interesting thing here is that Gregory represents God as taking the revenge ('Gregory talks of *divina ultio* and not *poena*', p. 152, n. 13), as opposed to the *þáttur* which implicitly sets God against vengeance.

<sup>30</sup> *Knýtlunga saga* in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. by Bjarni Guðnason. Íslensk fornrit XXXV (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1982), p. 260.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this is a male whetting, since 'Hann eggjaði mjök liðit'. I have written elsewhere on female whetting, but the concept of male incitement to revenge would repay further study; see 'Undermining and en-gendering vengeance: distancing and anti-feminism in the *Poetic Edda*', *Scandinavian Studies* 77 (2005), 1-28.

<sup>32</sup> *Ljósvetninga saga*, ed. by Björn Sigfússon. Íslensk fornrit X (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1940, p. 103).

<sup>33</sup> See Stephen N. Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga: The rôle of the Creative Compiler* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), p. 221; Úlfar Bragason, 'In the Scriptorium of *Sturlunga's* Compiler', in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. by M. Dallapiazza et al., *Hesperides*, 12 (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), pp. 471-482 (pp. 472 and 481).

<sup>34</sup> It is of course possible that the saga authors are misrepresenting to some extent the behaviour of their subjects according to their own biases.

<sup>35</sup> Chapters 4-6: Már is introduced as 'unpopular and ill-natured' (ch. 1), and his actions depicted unsympathetically, and criticised by Hafliði (ch. 6).

<sup>36</sup> *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. by Jón Jóhannesson, Magnús Finnbógason and Kristján Eldjárn, 2 vols (Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946), I 293.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, trans. Paul Schach (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Borgils saga skarða*, in *Sturlunga saga*, II 130.

<sup>39</sup> Compare Ælfric's *Life of St Edmund*, where it is said that canon law (*þa halgan canones*) forbids clerics' involvement in judgements which lead to executions, but the source of the rule is again not cited (l. 182, p. 55).

<sup>40</sup> See, however, Marlene Ciklamini's article 'The Christian Champion in *Íslendinga saga*: Eyjólfur Kársson and Aron Hjörleifsson', *Euphorion* 82 (1988), 226-37. Here she argues: 'In

describing the life of Eyjólfur Kársson and the youth of Aron Hjörleifsson, *Íslendinga saga* has set the champion into a Christian context. The narrative exemplified the lawlessness, pride, and vengefulness to which champions inclined and which disrupted community life. Nevertheless, by the mercy of God and with the aid of his vicar, the two champions were tamed to serve a purpose higher than that dictated by selfishness or pride [ . . . ] The end of their roles in *Íslendinga saga* thus coincides with their attainment of spiritual magnanimity or insight', (p. 237).

<sup>41</sup> *Guðmundar saga dýra*, in *Sturlunga saga*, I 198.