The ubiquity of fosterage in Old Icelandic literature betokens its crucial role as an instrument of peace-keeping among men notoriously prone to the paradox of violent dispute resolution. Although its historical roots may spread equally among older diplomatic customs such as hostage-taking (Watt 320), and traditional Germanic kinship arrangements such as avuncular adoption (Bremmer; Vestergard), fosterage emerges in tenth- to fourteenth-century Iceland as a forceful component of attempts to maintain peace in a society increasingly subject to the stresses of population growth, the machinations of land-hungry local chieftains, Christian evangelism, and the imperial ambitions of Norwegian kings (Byock, Medieval Iceland, 1–13 and 71–76; Jóhannesson 222 ff.; Sveinsson 35).

The retrospective narratives of the sagas (composed in the mid- to late-thirteenth century) emphasize the degree to which men of good will sought, with diminishing success, to preserve the social equilibrium of the independent commonwealth through procedures grounded in the Icelanders’ remarkable juridical code and “consensual” mode of governance (Byock, Medieval Iceland, 103–136). The most familiar of these procedures were aimed at constraining or deflecting violence in Iceland’s culture of chronic feuding: in the first instance, blood-vengeance was acknowledged and legitimated as a duty of kin under the law but was constrained by strict limitations upon exaction; and in the second, blood-vengeance was deflected—or at least forestalled—by manngjöld, “man-money,” compensation paid out to a slain person’s relatives according to intricate formulae of worth and affiliation or (more frequently) as the consequence of skilful negotiations by arbiters (Dennis et al.139–185).

Both of these arrangements, of course, have a long and thoroughly detailed history among the Germanic peoples, and as a result they have occasioned by far the greatest interest among literary and historical scholars. Fosterage, by contrast, despite its equal frequency and distribution, has been less comprehensively discussed, perhaps in part because it is a much more elusive concept, manifesting four diverse forms: (1) adoption of a relative’s or neighboring household’s child to promote solidarity in a clan or district; (2) deputing of childcare to a household servant or resident dependent; (3) placing a child with a socially inferior family in exchange for payment and/or preferment; and (4) “bloodbrotherhood,” a formal swearing of allegiance among adult males who are henceforward called fóstbraeðir (in all likelihood a derivation from [1]). Folklorists and anthropologists, to be sure, have provided extensive evaluations of such practices for many cultures, including those of medieval Europe, yet fosterage has seldom been studied in the specific contexts we mean to examine, while its deployment in curtailing bloodshed seems to have been classed primarily as a nebulous subcategory of manngjöld. Nevertheless, several of the sagas seem to us clearly to place fosterage on an equivalent footing with more familiar methods.
of peace-keeping, sometimes foregrounding it indeed as a synecdoche for the entire complex of negotiated legal settlements. For whereas blood-vengeance and compensation are formally governed, to a great extent, by William Ian Miller’s “balance-sheet model” (“Central Feud,” 292–293), fosterage is at once more intricate and less calculating: not only does it serve—or fail to serve—what we will call its “secular” purpose of forestalling violence (Durrenberger and Pálsson 72); it also entails personal relationships of nurture and affection among former or potential adversaries. Thus, although its practical utility in settlements clearly is, in Iceland as elsewhere in the Germanic realms, akin to hostage-taking (Miller, Bloodtaking, 172), fosterage as represented in the tropological world of saga-fiction generates an ethos which confounds its purely legalistic functions, creating bonds of love and fellowship that beg to be construed as glimpses of a more transcendent confraternity, Christian brotherhood.

It would follow, then, that any violent abrogation of fosterage depicted in the sagas must have been viewed, from the thirteenth-century perspective, as especially grievous, shattering both a legal compact and an often quite profound affective commitment, one held to be virtually equivalent, and often superior, to that of blood-kinship. Icelandic and other Norse texts are rich with episodes demonstrating the ideological and emotional ramifications of such a relationship. Foster-sons and fathers as well as foster-siblings are shown to grow inordinately fond of one another, and while there is virtually no juridical provision for the sharing or inheritance of property or claims to manngjöld among them, they nevertheless often treat one another with extraordinary generosity and are, equally often, committed to reciprocal support, even to the point of communally sanctioned vengeance when a fóstri is assaulted or slain (Dennis et al.154, 164). Fosterage is also, of course, legally defined in Grágás, but the extent of the obligations shared by fóstrar of all kinds appears to be governed in large measure by tradition and is nearly as contingent a matter as personal affection. The degree to which it attains prominence in a text such as Njal’s Saga, the quintessential narrative of formalized legal action, may therefore seem initially puzzling: does fosterage subserve the laws of settlement and compensation, but without the sort of meticulous parameters characteristic of the baugatal or the rules for citing witnesses or summoning jurymen? If so, it constitutes an extra-legal category, an instrument for enhancing settlements arrived at under the strict provisions of the law, and under circumstances where guarantees, in the absence of an enforcing executive, are understood to rely on personal good will, formal friendship, and a general consensus that fosterlings, even or especially those “obtained” in a settlement, are to be afforded the same protection as one’s own children (Miller, Bloodtaking, 172). A provision in Grágás appears to reflect this consensus in part, constraining an adult male assaulted by any underage male to do his assailant no “lasting injury,” but to “ward him off as he would do if he were his foster-father or father” (Dennis et al.155). There is, consequently, a certain understated ethos relative to the treatment of fosterlings, especially in cases involving violence. This is further enhanced by the simple human fact of the likelihood of the growth of affection between elders and any children placed in their care, a fact so obvious that a long train of academic commentators have tended to ignore it, although the saga authors do not.

Preeminent among the sagas in which fosterage appears in this light are Sturlu Saga, Laxdæla Saga, and Njal’s Saga. In each instance, fosterage is represented initially as an act of generosity complementary to a formal settlement. In Sturlu saga, Jón Loftsson agrees to assist Páll Solvason in a property dispute against Sturla Þórarðarson, who supports a wrongful claim to an
inheritance legitimately due to Páll (McGrew 103–113). There is no question in the saga that Sturla, known to be an “aggressive and … brutal parvenu,” has enlisted, for his own reasons, in a fraudulent cause (Byock, *Feud*, 156). Nevertheless, although Jón negotiates a settlement far less agreeable to Sturla’s case than Sturla had hoped, and so in Icelandic terms emerges as the “victor” in the suit, Jón offers, as a complementary gesture of conciliation, to foster Sturla’s son Snorri—Snorri Sturluson, of course, whose subsequent contributions to Icelandic cultural life, Jesse Byock points out, can be seen as the “far-reaching consequences … for all time” of this single act of extralegal magnanimity (Byock, *Feud*, 154–160). Enhancing a settlement in this way is therefore understood to be neither requisite nor even universally customary, yet it is accepted by all parties as reciprocally honorable. For if it is true that Sturla is in some sense humiliated by his “loss” within the legal and technical parameters of the case, it is also true that he is not such a fool as to forgo the advantages to be gained from the fosterage. And if it is further true, as the Icelanders often maintained, that “he who fosters another’s son is always said to be the lesser man” (*Laxdaela Saga*, Ch. 27), then Jón’s gesture must be construed as a deliberate act of self-abasement, fruitful not merely for “sealing the bargain” with a child’s body, as a balance-sheet model might represent it, but for re-establishing a condition of equality and proper fellowship between winner and loser, analogous perhaps to a “levelling oath” (Miller, “Central Feud,” 303). In this way, Jón repudiates arrogance while Sturla regains lost honor. Most importantly, the fostered boy becomes, ideologically, the legatee of his foster-father, being granted access to, and given encouragement to use, the extensive scholarly resources of Jón’s dwelling at Oddi (Byock, *Feud*, 159–160).

In conditions, then, where men were obliged to enforce their own rulings and to look as aggressively as possible to the success of their own affairs, guided in formal terms only by the law and a generalized agreement to abide by its provisions, any voluntary addition to a settlement can be thought of as a personal touch, a proffering of peace tokens above and beyond legalism and therefore a less stringently mediated human encounter involving complex affective domains that the law can scarcely represent. When it works, as in Snorri Sturluson’s case, it works to the benefit of all parties, and indeed, of the community as a whole. Unfortunately, like the legal procedures and consensual judgments it is intended to augment, it can fail, often with spectacular consequences. In *Laxdaela saga*, Olaf the Peacock, an illegitimate son of Hoskuld Dala-Kollsson, becomes estranged from his half-brother Thorleik as a consequence of a connivance by their dying father to give Olaf a major share of the family property, though as a bastard he is entitled to little more than a token. In order to redress the balance among his brethren, and particularly to massage the nettlesome Thorleik’s wounded dignity, Olaf offers to foster Thorleik’s son Bolli, reminding Thorleik of the virtually proverbial saying quoted above. Thorleik agrees readily. What might have been a major breach among Hoskuld’s descendants—and hence a diminishment of their power and prestige—is averted for the moment, and Olaf is able to raise his nephew and fostering with his own son Kjartan. Thorleik continues to be a troublesome member of the family, however, initiating a feud with his paternal uncle Hrut which Olaf, now the preeminent member of the clan, must go to some lengths to settle. For although Thorleik is too arrogant to negotiate or compromise with Hrut, Olaf’s magnanimous gesture of fostering Bolli has secured Thorleik’s personal loyalty. When Olaf realizes that there is no room in the district for his half-brother and his uncle both, he urges Thorleik to “go abroad”—that is, to get out of Iceland—a proposition to which Thorleik rather unexpectedly assents with the following words:
I have no fear of ... Hrut ... and I would never leave the country on that account. But if it matters so much to you, Olaf, and you think [our conflict] would put you in a difficult position, I will do as you ask; for I was never happier than when I was abroad. I also know that you will care for my son Bolli none the worse though I am far away; and Bolli is the one I love above all others. (Laxdaela saga, ch.38)

Olaf and Thorleik part “with the warmest affection” after Olaf gives assurance that he will “certainly care for Bolli in the same way as I have always done, and hold him in no less love than I do my own sons.”

The emphasis throughout those portions of Laxdaela saga in which Olaf plays a part is on the fairness and firmness of his dealings and on his integrity as a man of moderation. The central tragedy of the saga, the killing of Olaf’s son Kjartan by Bolli at the instigation of Gudrun Osvifsdottir, puts his qualities to the ultimate test. While he consents to allow Kjartan’s brothers to avenge themselves on Bolli’s allies, he forbids them to harm Bolli, even at the risk of antagonizing his own extraordinary wife, Thorgerd Egilsdottir, who remarks that Bolli has “cruelly repaid his fosterage.” It is she who cherishes the spirit of vengeance after Olaf’s death, goading their sons at last to kill Bolli in his turn (ch. 51 ff.). Thus, while Olaf’s magnanimity and fair dealing, to say nothing of his remarkable forebearance, go a long way toward maintaining peace in his contentious family, his efforts fail at last, a failure which must be seen in part as a failure of fosterage. Having twice pacified his half-brother Thorleik, and even earned unprecedented concessions from him specifically as a consequence of the fostering of Bolli, Olaf is nevertheless powerless to prevent the rivalry that develops between Bolli and Kjartan over Gudrun, or to forestall the malice of interested and unscrupulous persons such as Gudrun’s brothers or their henchmen the Thorhallusons. Additionally, as Jón Haukar Ingimundarson notes, certain issues regarding property imperil the peace: Kjartan can inherit property, but Bolli, the fostered son from the disenfranchised half of Olaf’s family, is obliged to buy it, a process Kjartan spitefully thwarts (“Spinning Goods” 230). All forms of negotiated peace, even those which involve relationships as intimate as fosterage, are ultimately understood to be contingent and transitory, subject to the wrecking impulses of vendetta, self-interest, ill will, and perhaps also fate. We are called upon unequivocally to admire Olaf’s nobility and skill, but to recognize withal the final futility of his actions. In tropological terms, the failure of fosterage is the failure of settlement.

Legendary ancestral figures like Olaf Horskulsson or Sturla Þorðarson, scholars agree, evoked in the authors of the surviving sagas—written for the most part in the thirteenth century at precisely the moment when the Icelandic republic’s balancing act was collapsing—a mixture of envy, nostalgia, and skepticism. It seems clear that the saga authors recognized the profundity of the divide represented by the Christian conversion and its effect upon traditional ways of life, especially upon attitudes toward the feud and violence more generally. The careful patchwork of private negotiation, formal law, and chieftain-bondi arrangements which had been assembled throughout the period from the Settlement to the mission of Thangbrand and its aftermath was reviewed and appraised with an often sympathetic but also penetrating scrutiny. Fosterage as a component of this patchwork, we have suggested, seems to assume a tropological utility, functioning as an image of the social fabric and thereby emphasizing that fabric’s peculiar frailty. Settlements made by “good men” (Jesch), sanctioned by law and the consent of the community, and supplemented by vinátta and vinfengi (“formal friendship”), could not in the end be counted upon to maintain peace and stability, any more than fosterage could be relied upon to curtail conflict. The saga authors, it must be recalled, be-
longed to the tenth generation of Icelandic Christians. Their antiquarian interest, as well as their capacity to empathize with an Olaf or a Sturla, is thus properly to be understood as a sort of hard-edged, quasi-homiletic pragmatism. The contributions of Durrenberger and Pálsson, Byock, Miller, Pencak, and numerous others to the illumination of the social and ideological stresses disclosed in the saga narratives have frequently emphasized material conflicts—land, wealth, and power—and it is clear that these were major focuses of contention. Yet because the saga authors had the luxury of writing what we would call literature and not history, they permitted themselves a tropological expatriation of the material facts, offering parables of a larger failure: not merely the failure of their ancestors to organize, as it were, the ecology of Iceland, but their failure to unite in Christian fellowship, to honor a common brotherhood.11

Nowhere is this clearer than in the “masterpiece,” as Einar Ól. Sveinsson rightly insisted upon calling it, Njal’s Saga. William Ian Miller’s brilliant exposition of the motivations underlying the Njalssons’ killing of their foster-brother Hoskuld Thrainsson helps to redirect a century-long scholarly discussion of matters such as honor and envy to the pragmatic material base of the Njalssons’ concerns: the eclipse of their own power and influence by the rise of Hoskuld, promoted at every turn by their own father (“Justifying Skarpheðinn” 333–338; “Central Feud” 316–318). As Miller notes, Hoskuld’s death has been represented as a “despicable” and “shocking” crime (“Justifying Skarpheðinn” 316) but for that reason also as a conundrum in the saga: how exactly can the Njalssons have been persuaded to undertake an assassination so plainly contrary to their father’s will and seemingly so unmerited? The machinations of Mord Valgardsson in the interests of his own waning chieftaincy certainly play a role, but Mord’s talent for sowing dissension between the foster-brothers, who have hitherto been shown to be deeply attached to one another, seems hardly an adequate explanation for so “heinous” an act. Mord’s paganism and his resemblance to trickster-figures and Satan are of course apparent, but why are the Njalssons so susceptible? Clark suggests that Skarpheðinn harbors a subliminal contempt for Hoskuld because he has too easily reconciled himself with his father’s killers (86), a notion Sveinsson had toyed with earlier, noting as well the frailty of the foster-relationship in instances where loyalty to blood-kin (i.e., the slain Hoskuld Njallson) might assume precedence (149–150; see also Bühler 13). Yet Miller’s contention that we must look beyond matters of honor to material concerns, to the struggle for power and wealth waged among the island’s chieftains and prominent families, echoes the paradigmatic theses of Byock and numerous others that the sagas, set mostly in the tenth and eleventh centuries but written in the thirteenth, reflect their authors’ decision to render the upheavals of the Sturlung Age in historical-allegorical form, displacing contemporary preoccupations onto their ancestors by way of a “generation-gap theme” (Schach 376–377 and 380–381) and thereby establishing both a narrative of causation as well as a parable of the Commonwealth’s (retrospectively predictable) enfeeblement. Hoskuld Drainsson’s death, therefore, and the subsequent virtual erasure of Njal’s family at the Burning, depict in microcosm the failure of the “patchwork” we described above, that collection of overlapping contingent arrangements and legal formalities whereby a fragile stability was maintained for several centuries, only to be undone at last in the violence of the thirteenth century.13

This failure is chronicled specifically in the long and complex account of Njal’s attempts to contain the damage consequent upon his wife Bergthora’s feud with Hallgerd, the wife of Gunnar of Hliarend. Jesse Byock’s structural reading of this and other “feud chains” in the
saga acknowledges but tends to downplay slightly what we see as their most critical feature: they are all causally related to one another in an intricate sequence, the many strands of which, represented as components in a single irresistible destiny, are ultimately unmanageable, even for a lawyer and seer of Njal’s extraordinary gifts, or for the kind of Christian exemplar Njal becomes (Byock, Feud, 161–190; Miller, “Central Feud,” 294–295; Sveinsson 180). The role played by fosterage here, as in the other sagas, is complementary to legal proceedings and negotiations, but it is rendered the more poignant both by the narrative’s extended retrospective from the Sturlung Age to the late tenth and early eleventh centuries and by the saga author’s decision to exploit the full implications, the immediately personal as well as the durably social. Njal’s fostering of the son of a man whom his sons have killed is intended to write coda to the feud leading up to it, a feud that has claimed more than a score of lives and required numerous exchanges of manngjöld. The intricacy of the situation—and the truth of the proverb uttered in the narrative, namely that “the nose is next to the eyes”—is suggested by the strategy Njal must use to effect his extra-legal complement to the settlement he has negotiated for his sons: Thrain Sigfusson’s son Hoskuld is the nephew of Njal’s son-in-law Ketil; Ketil, a moderate man deeply conflicted by the dispute that has led to the death of his brother and his estrangement from his wife’s brothers, is induced by Njal to approach Hoskuld’s mother Thorgerd (the daughter of Hallgerd), as Njal himself clearly feels he cannot, with an offer to foster the boy. Once this has been effected, Njal seems confident that he can, without antagonizing Thorgerd, legitimately transfer the fosterage from his daughter’s and Ketil’s household to his own. The relevant conversation between Ketil and Thorgerd is recorded in detail, as is the one which takes place subsequently between Njal and Hoskuld, and each is revealing, especially in contrast to the one un-recorded conversation in the sequence, that between Ketil and Njal when, presumably, the plan is worked out. Thorgerd agrees to Ketil’s offer, provided he will swear an oath to give Hoskuld dowry-money and, most importantly, to avenge him if he is slain (an oath that ultimately binds Ketil to participate in the Burning). Njal’s own conversation with Hoskuld, at that time a ten-year-old boy, has generated much scholarly commentary, disclosing as it does a certain sympathy of outlook between the old man and the boy: Njal questions Hoskuld closely to determine what he knows, and how he feels, about his father’s death. Hoskuld replies that he knows perfectly well who killed Thrain, but he also knows that full compensation has been paid. No obligation for vengeance accrues to him, therefore, nor does he appear to desire it. The fosterage arrangements are made, and Njal grows to love Hoskuld “dearly.” Even his ferocious sons appear to delight in the child, whom they take everywhere with them.

Given what we have suggested about the extra-legal complementarity of fosterage and peace-settlements, the circuitousness of Njal’s offer seems odd: it occurs some time after the settlement; is not represented as an aspect of the settlement; and has to be concluded with what clearly looks like subterfuge. Most interesting of all, the saga author occludes Njal’s motivations by suppressing his conversation with Ketil. Sveinsson has observed that such omissions in the saga are associated with “secret plotting,” especially of the type undertaken by the devious Mord (147). What, then, are we asked to infer from this silence? That Njal is conspiring with the gullible Ketil to get his hands on the boy as an assurance, to deploy him literally as a hostage, an arrangement which Thorgerd would of course repudiate at once? William Ian Miller makes this suggestion only half-facetiously (Bloodtaking 172), but its plausi-
bility derives both from the antiquity of the practice of hostage-taking and from the circum-
spension of Njal himself: once the boy is in his power, Thorgerd—very much her mother’s daughter—will think twice about goading male relatives to violence against the Njalssons in vi-
olation of the settlement. The fact that the Njalssons never let Hoskuld out of their sight appears, from this perspective, rather sinister.

Such a reading is, however, altogether at odds with the relationship that develops be-
tween Njal and Hoskuld. From their first en-
counter to their last, the two are depicted as enjoying a special bond, one that suggests—as many have noted—Njal’s reliance on Hoskuld as a surrogate heir, an ideological heir (e.g., Sveins-
son 170–171). Skarpheðinn and his brothers are fierce and doughty men, but they are alto-
gether dissimilar to Njal, implicitly taking after their mother’s side of the family and recapitulat-
ing the traditional warrior vices as well as virtues (Sveinsson 143). Skarpheðinn in partic-
ular is a henchman rather than a politician, while none of the Njalssons has any discernible inclination toward the rich intellectual and spir-
itual life that Njal is repeatedly shown to lead; certainly none of them will ever be counted, as their father is, among Iceland’s most eminent legal experts and exemplary Christians; and they are wholly without prescience. Hence, Njal’s circumspection in taking on Hoskuld is as much a matter of preventing their interference as it is of circumventing Thorgerd, for as he says elsewhere regarding his peace-stratagem, his sons’ presence at the negotiations would not make the fosterage any easier, but they would abide by the agreement once he has made it.

Hoskuld, by contrast, though he is the son of a man Njal himself has called “stupid” with good reason (ch. 91), shows already at the age of ten a predisposition toward tact and introspection. Under Njal’s tutelage he grows up to be “gent-
tle-tongued and generous, a man of great com-
pose” (ch. 94), and Njal is shown to go to ex-
traordinary lengths to benefit him. When Hildi-
gunn, the woman Njal persuades Hoskuld to woo, insists that she will accept only a chieftain, although no chieftaincies are available, Njal deadlocks the entire Icelandic legal system for a year in order to contrive the creation of a Fifth Quarter Court of Appeals and the new chieftaincies it would require. This particular strata-
gem is seen by William Pencak as the climax of Njal’s “corruption” of a system which comes to pit law against justice (26–27), but it seems to us, rather, to measure the degree of strain placed upon the contingent arrangements by which the administration of Icelandic justice has hitherto been accomplished: Njal has few heirs worthy to carry on his legacy of skillful and con-
ciliatory legalism, and later of explicitly Chris-
tian pietism. For this reason he seeks to cre-
ate such an heir through a fosterage modeled on those which, as we have seen, are held to be complementary to negotiated settlements. Hence, while the community at large and even his own sons may perceive the traditional mag-
nanimity of the man who symbolically abases himself by offering to foster an adversary’s child, Njal has in fact moved the relationship, along with Iceland, into new territory. Hoskuld is to be the new Njal, his chieftaincy a success-
ful hybrid of secular law and Christian culture. Njal’s love for him—so great that when Hoskuld is killed he says that he would gladly have given “two” (later “all”) of his sons in exchange—is the index of his hope for a future stability denied to the heirs of his body.

The great question Njal’s Saga finally raises in this context is twofold: naturally enough, one speculates on how things might have gone had Njal’s contrivances for Hoskuld been success-
ful. Would the contingent adaptations of the patchwork have been strengthened, gaining from Hoskuld’s unique ideological amalgam an extended independence for the common-
wealth: an ethical Christian republic? This, of course, is answerable only in fiction, but Miller,
in a laconic aside, observes that such might have been the case “had nothing else happened between [the Sigfussons and the Njalssons]”—a flat impossibility in the terms both of the saga and of the social system it depicts (“Central Feud” 303; Clover, passim). The more pragmatic question goes, we believe, to the heart of the saga’s ideology: why did Njal’s fosterage arrangements fail? Pencak is by no means wrong to point out that Njal manipulates the legal system to the point where he himself may be held (posthumously) accountable for the Battle of the Alþing, the moment when the country Njal has described as so carefully built up with law, is with lawlessness very nearly laid waste (Conflict 30–31). Yet it cannot be denied that Njal’s reaction to the death of Hoskuld, his nearly desperate attempts to reach a settlement with Flósi, and his final hagiographic translation in the Burning, are among the most moving scenes in all of Icelandic, perhaps in all of medieval literature. If Njal is “corrupt,” as Pencak argues, he is also redeemed. Yet surely corrupt is too strong a condemnation for the man who describes his murdered foster-son as the “sweetest light of [his] eyes,” and who, at the Burning, assures his household, including his grandson Thord (his last and youngest foster-son), that God will not allow them all to burn “in this world and the next.”

Njal’s fosterage of Hoskuld fails, rather, because in the view of an author beset by memories of the Sturlung Age, the Icelandic system has failed. Intergenerational deterioration (Schach; Pencak) and the system’s fundamental instability (Sørensen 244–245; 256; Sigurðsson 212–214) culminate in the Battle of the Alþing. It is here, precisely, that fosterage assumes its synecdochic role, a trope illuminating the lability at the heart of the law: it is the old dispensation, and it must be supplanted by, rather than commingled with, the new dispensation, continental Christianity with its popes and kings and inherited imperial hierarchies. The author who depicts the Battle of the Alþing (c. 1012) may himself have witnessed that body’s symbolic abolition, the supplanting of Grágás by Járnþá and Jónsbók (1271–1280). As numerous scholars have observed, the old law’s contingencies, its connections to the pagan past, its literally jury-rigged patchwork, dependent upon good will and consensus and private enforcement, are incommensurate with the authority and ideology of medieval Christian culture. The poignancy of Njal’s attempt to unite them in Hoskuld derives its force not merely from the author’s extraordinary talent for representing Njal’s personal grief and desperation at Hoskuld’s death, but from the demonstrable futility of Njal’s enterprise: Iceland in the tenth and eleventh centuries was inhabited by far more men of Skárphéðinn’s or Mórð’s type than of Njal’s or Hoskuld’s; indeed, the Augustinian conception of Man promulgated by missionaries and ascetics, as well as the author’s own familiarity with Iceland’s deterioration in the thirteenth century, seem to have held out little hope that secular affairs would ever be otherwise.

Fosterage in these circumstances is uncoupled from its role as an extra-legal enhancement for pagan-era settlements and deployed to the foreground as a model of Christian community, the transcendent fellowship of the estranged restored, perceptible but unattainable in the sublunar sphere of history. Sveinsson helps to characterize here the tropological mutation fosterage undergoes in the saga: before Njal’s conversion to Christianity, his relationship with Hoskuld signifies, as we have intimated, both the ethical attainments of the virtuous pagan and the idealistic formulae of the virtuous pagan republic; subsequently, these ideals “deepen,” and Hoskuld becomes Njal’s “spiritual son,” the “symbol” of his faith—indeed, “of his own soul” (170–172). The Psalms as well as the Pauline letters make reference to symbolic adoption, interpreted already in late-classical
Christianity as an image of universal consanguinity, of humanity’s shared condition as the fosterling of God (Sveinsson 171; Boswell, “Expositio,” 30). Miller, Pencak, and Sørensen have identified a certain tropological opulence among the Icelanders, repudiating—as does Hamer in a different context—the old contention that there is little figurative language in the sagas (Hamer 91–92). The saga authors, in fact, apprehended their world through a series of tropes, layers of figuration far more complex than mere simile. Bredsdorff attributes figurative power to “speech acts” whose “corruption” represents corruptions of the legal and social system; Miller notes that the feud and the balance-sheet “models” served to configure representations of “politics” in the absence of a formal political system (“Central Feud” 293–294); while Pencak has recognized the saga authors’ employment of signifying spaces, Njal’s house at Berghorsknoll, for example, operating as a synecdoche for the commonwealth (“Njal’s House” 74–75); and Sørensen has shown how “conceptual patterns” such as marriage, the “kinship system,” the “rules of inheritance,” and the feud all did duty as hermeneutical tropes for the processes of history. In each of these instances, the saga authors and the Icelandic ancestors depicted by them are shown, in Hayden White’s terms, to engage in tropological prefiguration of their field of perception and to compose their narratives, or conduct their lives, in a manner consistent with the tropes that condition their sight.

Hoskuld’s death, Kjartan’s death in Laxdæla saga, and (nearly) the death of the Njálssons, all point toward the stern ethical demands of the foster-relationship as a trope which conditions apprehension. Both Hoskuld and Kjartan assert that it is better to be killed by one’s foster-brother(s) than to do the killing, an assertion given terrible force by Njal’s wish to substitute his sons for the foster-son they have slain. The challenge issued, then, by the saga author to his contemporaries is not merely to effect settlements after the fact, however admirably they may be enhanced by the familial ideology implicit in fosterage; the challenge is to extend familial ideology, the conception of universal consanguinity under God, to all of one’s fellows, even as God has extended it to man. Grágás contains a “peace pledge,” probably a late addition, grounded in this very notion. Under it, disputants are enjoined not merely to settle in the old way by paying compensation and soothing honor (although they must do these things, too), but to commit themselves to “shar[ing] knife and meat-bit and all things with each other like family and not like foes . . . . each reconciled with the other as father with son or son with father” (Dennis et al. 184–185).

Works Cited


_Burning of Njal as a Failure of Fosterage_.


Notes

1 See, for example, the work of Heusler; Miller; Murray; and Pencak.

2 Discussions are as diverse as the phenomenon itself. Cf., e.g., Bremmer; Welsh; Silk; Andersson and Miller; and Boswell.

3 Note, for example, Bühler’s observation that contractual fosterage for payment appears to have been “by far the predominant mode” in real practice (“Fosterage” 9), yet in the sagas this form rarely plays a significant role.

4 Contra Jochens’ assertion (“Old Norse Motherhood” 210) that fosterage experienced little change during the transition from paganism to Christianity, we would argue that Christian deployments of the practice show far more consciousness of its tropological and spiritual value, e.g. its relation to oblation.

5 This is a widely remarked feature of fosterage as well as other means of securing peaceful coalitions. Cf. Durrenberger and Pálsson 59–61; Sigurðsson 215; Jochens, “Old Norse Motherhood,” 207; Bühler 11; and Sveinsson 172, n. 5.


7 Instances are far too numerous to list comprehensively here. Representative cases can be cited from the Vinland narratives (cf. Hermansson); Saxo (Danish History, Bk III); Snorri Sturluson (Harald Harfager’s Saga, Ch. 26); Eyrbyggja Saga (passim; cf. also Byock, “Inheritance”); and Jón’s Saga (Cormack 603). Additional examples are cited by Miller, Bloodtaking, 171–172.

8 Cf. in this regard Andersson, “The King of Iceland”; Byock, Medieval Iceland, 70; and Sigurðsson, “Friendship,” 210, 213.

9 See also Heimskringla: Harald Harfager’s Saga, Ch. 42, where King Harald sends his son Hakon to be fostered by Aethelstan of England, with the express purpose of exacerbating their rivalry by imputing to him in this fashion a status lower than Harald’s own; Snorri Sturluson, however, the author of Heimskringla and himself the foster-son of his father’s rival, remarks here that “in truth there was no injury to the dignity of either,” and Aethelstan learned to “love ... Hakon above all his relations.” Scholars often recall the first half of this anecdote but not the second. Cf., e.g., Bremmer, “Avunculate,” 74.

10 Cf. Byock, Medieval Iceland, 130–133 and passim; also Durrenberger and Pálsson.

11 For discussions of the profound indebtedness of the sagas to Christian-Continental culture, see, e.g., Boyer; Lönnroth; Ross; and Thompson.

12 We disagree with Miller’s somewhat contorted argument that the Njalssons and Hoskuld Thrainsson are not foster-brothers, and that when they kill him, therefore, they are merely killing their father’s foster-son (“Justifying Skarphedinn,” 319; “Central Feud” 315). Certainly they are not fóstbroður in the formal “adult” sense of definition 4 above; and certainly, since the Njalssons are much older than Hoskuld, they cannot have “grown up together” as foster-brothers ordinarily did; it is also true that the Njalssons never address Hoskuld formally as “Foster-Brother.” Yet such forms of address are actually rather rare, and there is no legal age limitation upon the foster-relationship between resident kin in the fostering household and the fosteree. Hence, in the eyes of the community, we would contend, they are all fóstar.

13 See especially Jóhannesson 222 ff.; Byock, Medieval Iceland, passim; and Pencak, Conflict, 125–129.

14 “Ethical criticism,” as characterized by Van Der Westhuizen and also Pálsson, interrogates the pervasiveness of destiny, preferring to hold characters morally accountable for their actions. We would emphasize, following Durrenberger and (Gisli) Pálsson, the complementarity rather than the mutual exclusivity of the two notions, particularly when one considers the feud/vengeance cycle as a trope for inevitable lapsarianism ("Friendship in the Absence of States” 71).

15 The Magnusson and Pálsson translation is misleading here, since Ketil’s offer is represented as an “adoption,” but the original clearly says “boöja til fósturs.” For discussion of this significant distinction, see Bühler 15.

16 Cf., however, his earlier fostering of Thorhall Asgrímsson, whom he trains to be a lawyer and who personally strikes the first blow in the Battle of the Albing.

17 Whereas Hamer and Sveinsson both cite Biblical as well as hagiographic precedents for the phrase, Hamer emphasizes the negative connotations (95 ff.), Sveinsson the positive (31).

18 E.g., Pencak, “Njal’s House,” 74–75; Berman, passim; Andersson, “The King of Iceland,” 933.

19 See White, Tropics, 1–25 and 81–100, and Metahistory, passim.