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The Price of Integrity

Conceptions of honour in Egil’s saga

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ABSTRACT This article gives a detailed examination of honour performances in another saga about early Icelanders written in the 13th century. Although the old and masculine honour code is strongly expressed, the saga – as it is written in a period of transition – also contains Christian values, which produce a more ethically oriented and individualized honour concept.

KEY WORDS saga | Iceland | masculine honour | values | individuality

Then Thrand sat down to tie his shoe, and Thorstein raised his axe high in the air and struck him on the neck, so that his head fell on to his chest. Thorstein piled some rocks over his body to cover it up and went back home to Borg (Egil’s Saga 2000, 172).

Reading the sagas of the Icelanders can be a shocking experience for the modern reader. Confronted with their descriptions of killings it is easy to assume ‘at menneska var meir hjartelause’ [that people were more callous] in Norse times, as the Russian philologist Mikhail Ivanovich Steblin-Kamensky pointed out (1975, 90). It is not the killings themselves that lead to this conclusion, for these are familiar enough occurrences from today’s news coverage and entertainment. What is shocking is their portrayal as ‘noko heilt naturleg og normalt’ [something completely natural and normal], as being an obvious consequence of ‘ein moralsk skyldnad, ei plikt’ [a moral obligation, a duty] (1975, 90; 93).

As a precept for how to live your life, this duty can seem far from our everyday lives, but it is highly relevant to our understanding of Norse Scandinavia and certain parts of the world today. In honour-based societies this duty is the yardstick

1. This article is translated by Richard Burgess.
2. All references to Egil’s Saga (hereafter ES) are from the translation of Bernhard Schruder in The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection (Viking Penguin, 2000), pp. 3–184.
for every human action and it decides whether an individual maintains or loses the respect of his or her fellows – respect being the word most commonly used these days to denote honour. The subject of this article is the Norse honour culture as portrayed in the sagas of the Icelanders. Conceptions of honour are illustrated and discussed in reference to one of the best-known and also controversial works of Norse literature, *Egil’s saga*.

**SAGA AND HONOUR – EARLIER RESEARCH**

In his impressive work *Fortælling og ære: Studier i islændingesagaerne* [Narrative and honour: Studies in the Sagas of the Icelanders] Preben Meulengracht Sørensen gives an in-depth account and analysis of conceptions of honour in the Sagas of the Icelanders. With *Egil’s saga* as his point of departure, he investigates the relationship between the Icelandic yeoman farmer and the Norwegian king, represented first and foremost by the main character Egil Skallagrimsson and King Eirik Bloodaxe (Sørensen 1993, 127–147). Sørensen sees the saga as ‘islændingesaga om konger’ [a Saga of Icelanders about kings] where ‘en gammel samfundsnorm’ [an old social norm] governed by more or less equal farmers comes into conflict with a new polity in which Norway is united under one king who demands absolute loyalty from all his subjects (1993, 129).

According to Sørensen, Egil Skallgrimsson’s family represents the ‘old’ code of honour throughout the saga, a code in which a man can acknowledge the supremacy of another, but still reserves the right to decide for himself (1993, 128–129). The advent of monarchy in Nordic society meant an upheaval in traditional concepts of honour where loyalty to the king became more important than noble descent and honourable conduct. *Egil Skallagrimsson’s saga* illustrates the difference between the traditional Norse concept of honour from the time before the monarchy and the new concept that finally prevailed. Sørensen emphasises especially the role of the king as ‘et fikspunkt, de islandske begreber om status, frihed og ære udmåles fra eller sættes i modsætning til’ [‘a fixed point which Icelandic concepts of status, freedom and honour are measured by or put in opposition to’] (1993, 146).

In the Sagas of Icelanders the ideal relationship between people of different classes is portrayed as static: A man of noble family shows this by demonstrating his superior status in relation to the rest of society. In practice, however, this is not always the case. Marriages can turn out to be springboards for conflict in the sagas. When a man marries a woman of higher or lower status, this threatens society’s social stability. The feud between the monarchy and Egil Skallagrimsson’s
family initially springs from two instances of socially unacceptable marriages (Sørensen 1993, 132–135). However, the main reason for the feud is differing attitudes to honour, where the traditional attitude based on equilibrium and mutual acceptance between farmers is challenged by a new one where loyalty to the king is paramount.

**TIPPING THE HONOUR SCALES – THE NORSE CONCEPT OF HONOUR**

Modern notions and conceptions of honour are far removed from Norse ones. The English word and its German and Scandinavian equivalents, ‘Ehre’ and ‘ære’, in no way render the scope of the phenomenon in Norse society. In Old Norse there were several words denoting what we today would call ‘honour’. Among the most common were sómi and sæmð – ‘that which is fitting’ –, virðing – literally ‘evaluation’, figuratively ‘esteem’, ‘regard’, metorð and metnaðr which meant ‘appreciate/judge’, either in concrete terms about material things or figuratively about people (Sørensen 1993, 188–189).

All in all, concepts of honour are closely associated with the word helgi, a word used in Icelandic law texts to denote personal integrity. It is rendered in modern English with words like ‘esteem’ and ‘respect’ but means, literally, ‘sacredness’ (Sørensen 1993, 180–181, 191–192). This underlines the individual’s ‘sacred’ right to maintain his honour. If a person’s integrity is violated, this must be redressed. The scales of honour must be reset to restore the status quo between members of society. Within the framework of Icelandic law, even purely verbal insults could be avenged with death within a given deadline (Sørensen 1993, 182). Honour was not an unambiguous term, but a multi-faceted system that created a framework for the lives of all free men.

**THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES IN CONNECTION WITH THE SAGAS OF ICELANDERS**

As a genre, the Sagas of Icelanders differ from other sagas from the High Middle Ages in Scandinavia in that they are about Iceland’s ‘land-takers’, i.e. the first settlers to take up permanent residence in Iceland (Tulinius 2014, 148–149). This implies a historical problem: Are the Sagas of Icelanders narratives about the time the action takes place (9th–10th centuries), or are they legacies of the time in which

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3. Steblin-Kamensky also mentions the words vegr, frami, vegsemð, heidr, hovudhódr and drengrskapr as words that can be rendered as ‘honour’, without translating the individual words (1975, 98).
they were written (13th–14th centuries)? Are the notions of ethics and morality featured in the sagas to be ascribed to a heathen or to a Roman-Catholic Christian society?

The situation for *Egil Skallagrímsson’s saga* as regards sources is similarly problematic. By all accounts Egil Skallgrimsson was a man who lived approximately 910–990 AD (Lie 2003, 483, 487). It is reasonable to suppose that the saga gives some correct information about who he was. Most probably he was a tall, strong man, a capable Viking and an outstanding poet. The academic consensus concerning the work is that it was written in Iceland around 1230 (Sørensen 1993, 117). The Icelandic scholar Torfi H. Tulfinius believes that the saga has features that indicate that Snorri Sturluson was the author, but a definite conclusion about the authorship remains impossible (2014, 213–216).

Sørensen points out that the tendency in saga research has moved from ‘en synsmåde, hvor sagaerne betraktedes som troværdige historiske beretninger om den førkristne “sagatid”, til standpunkter, hvor sagaerne karakteriseres som mere eller mindre fiktive skriftprodukter, der hovedsagelig spejler forfatterens samtid, om overhovedet nogen virkelighed’ [a view in which the sagas are seen as reliable historical narratives about the pre-Christian ‘saga age’, to positions where the sagas are characterised as more or less fictional written artefacts that primarily reflect the author’s own time, if they reflect reality at all] (1993, 325). Tulinius, for example, in his relatively recent study interprets *Egil’s saga* as being closely associated with Christian notions of penitence, and stresses that the work may have been written as a sort of public confession to mollify the conflicts between Snorri Sturluson and other prominent Icelanders (2014, 266–270).

Historian Jon Vidar Sigurdsson links Iceland’s literary activity to the monasteries and the residences of chieftains, and refers here to several clerical saga writers (2008, 184–185). He underlines the ‘double connection’ these clerical saga writers had: ‘De arbeidet ikke bare for sine klostre eller biskoper, men også for de verdslige lederne’ [They did not just work for their monasteries and their bishops, but for their secular leaders too] (2008, 185). Saga writing was an activity several chieftain clans had dealings with, not least in order to promote themselves in relation to other clans and to establish or preserve social differences through the saga’s narrative about class division.

The obvious role that pre-Christian notions of honour have in *Egil Skallagrimson’s saga* indicate that they also influenced Catholic Iceland at the time the sagas were written. As Steblin-Kamensky points out: ‘Hemnarplikta voks fram under sosiale vilkår som framleis fanst på Island i sogetida, og dei var heller ikkje ute av verda på den tid då sogene vart skrivne’ [The duty of vengeance grew out of social
circumstances that still pertained during the saga age, and they had not disappeared at the time the sagas were written either (1975, 99). The portrayal of pre-Christian Iceland puts the saga writer’s own time in perspective. Sørensen maintains that the Icelandic saga writer tries to give an unadulterated presentation of the past ‘as past’ in order to show the difference between the contemporary situation and what was seen as ‘det ægte islandske’ [the real Iceland] of the saga narratives (1993, 147). Thus for Roman Catholic Icelanders, the pagan past too may have appeared as a golden age that gradually saw its relatively egalitarian society replaced by a more hierarchical system.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS ARTICLE

Sørensen’s analysis of *Egil’s saga* points to broad perspectives in the narrative using examples from the action. However, there is no analysis of individual episodes as a basis for a comprehensive view of the saga. The contribution of this article will be to analyse honour as motif and theme in *Egil’s saga* on the basis of individual episodes. The aim is to throw light, specifically, on how notions of honour are manifested in practice in particular incidents and, more generally, on what expectations there were of ‘a man of honour’ in Norse times.

Where relevant, I will interpret the saga in the light of modern theories of honour in order to illustrate its relevance to our own times. According to journalist and critic James Bowman, honour is an impulse that has been latent in human beings throughout the ages as a sort of universal sense of justice (2006, 1). As such, it has certain features that should be recognisable also in our own times. At the same time, honour is ‘en social norm med meget forskellig betydning og vægt […] i forskellige samfund’ [a social norm with very different meaning and emphasis […] in different societies] Sørensen 1993, 187). Today’s theories of honour can provide useful tools for shedding light on notions of honour in *Egil’s saga* for the modern reader, while the use of such theories requires that significant distinctions between Norse and modern understandings of honour are identified and discussed.

EGIL’S SAGA

THE FARMER’S SON AND THE EARL’S DAUGHTER

Egil’s paternal grandfather Kveldulf was the close friend of a man called Berdla-Kari who had two sons, Eyvind and Olvir. Berdla-Kari is referred to as ‘a very wealthy man’. His son Olvir, with the nickname ‘Hump’, falls in love with Solveig ‘the fair’, the daughter of Earl Atli. Olvir asks to marry her, but ‘the earl, not con-
sidering him worthy enough, would not marry her to him’. This upsets Olvir who reacts to this rejection by composing love poems about Solveig (ES 2000, 8–9). Earl Atli’s sons then go to Olvir’s home to kill him (ES 2000, 11). Olvir manages to escape and finds service in Harald Fair-hair’s court as a skald.

The attitude attributed to the earl that Olvir is not good enough can of course mean that Olvir lacked the necessary personal qualities in the earl’s opinion. At the same time, it is also conceivable that it is Olvir’s lineage that is lacking. Although Olvir Hump is son of a ‘wealthy’ man, that does not mean that he is of noble family. If they are to maintain their reputation, the earl and other male members of the family cannot accept his daughter marrying a farmer. ‘Ægteskaber på tværs av sociale skel må afvises, fordi de vil føre til social uorden’ [Marrying across social divisions is rejected because it would lead to social disorder] (Sørensen 1993, 134). Maintaining the balance of prestige between individuals and families is crucial. However, an offer of marriage from a man of inferior lineage is not in itself offensive, precisely because the earl withholds his consent. So why do the earl’s sons try to kill Olvir Hump?

In the Sagas of Icelanders, women are in principle passive as regards honour, according to Sørensen: ‘Kvindens status og ære er den samme som hendes fars og brødres og efter ægteskabet deler hun den med sin mand og sine sønner’ [A woman’s status and honour is the same as her father’s and her brothers’, and after marriage she shares it with her husband and her sons] (1993, 214). In traditional honour-based societies, a man’s honour is dependent on the behaviour of the woman. As social anthropologist Unni Wikan points out, this is, paradoxically, often connected with the fact that women in such societies lack any ‘independent honour’, but are part of and repositories of their husband’s honour through their sexuality. This ‘sex honour’ means that the husband must compensate for any dishonour that the woman’s sexuality incurs him. The notion of the husband’s honour being synonymous with the family’s honour clearly shows a patriarchal attitude to honour and gender.

‘Sex honour’ in the examples that Wikan mentions is an either/or issue. If honour is lost in connection with the woman’s sexuality, only killing the woman can restore the family’s honour (2008, 16–17). In the Sagas of Icelanders, however, honour is avenged or protected by killing the man, just as the earl’s sons go to kill Olvir rather than using violence towards Solveig. Unlike in modern cases of ‘sex

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4. Sigurdsson points out that other scholars claim that women could have honour (2008, 87). However, in practice this interpretation of women’s honour has little significance, because the means used by women to protect their family’s honour (whether they had a personal stake in it or not) was for the most part the same: to goad the family’s male members to action.
honour’, saga women are not directly responsible for men’s actions, excluded as they are from the use of violence by their gender.

In Icelandic law, love poetry (mansǫngr) about women was forbidden, since it was seen as an offence to the woman and her family (Sørensen 1993, 202). As with ‘sex honour’, it is not the facts or realities that are crucial, but how the case is conveyed in public (Wikan 2008, 17, cf. Sørensen 1993, 200). Olvir Hump’s love songs about Solveig are an offence regardless of the truth content of the verses. The offence impacts not just on Solveig’s reputation, but primarily on the honour of her male relations.

It is also the duty of the men to avenge the offence. The father and brothers are members of the same honour group, which Frank Henderson Stewart defines as ‘a set of people who follow the same code of honor and who recognize each other as doing so’ (1994, 54–55). The code of honour consists of the actions each member of the honour group must carry out in order to retain the respect of the others and membership of the group. Within the honour group to which the earl’s family belongs, it is obviously part of the code of honour to maintain the family’s status and reputation. The earl does this by refusing Olvir his daughter’s hand in marriage. When Olvir goes a step further and writes poetry about Solveig, the code of honour requires a reaction from the earl and/or his sons, because poetry about Solveig also offends the honour of the male family members. As Sørensen points out in connection with offences that take the form of poetry, the offended party can only effectively put himself in respect by avenging himself on the composer or conveyor of the poetry (1993, 202).

Why does Olvir compose poetry about Solveig when the consequences are potentially so disastrous for him? The answer is that he himself has an offence to avenge. A rejected offer of marriage is an offence against the suitor and his family (Sørensen 1993, 177). The love poems about Solveig are thus Olvir Hump’s revenge against Earl Atli and his family. This offence must be answered with a new act of revenge unless the earl and his sons are to lose honour. When the earl’s sons come to take revenge, they have ‘far too many men for Olvir to fend off’ with them that Olvir has to flee rather than take up arms (ES 2000, 11). The attack by the earl’s sons is an attempt to show their membership of the same honour group as their father through a demonstration of their superior power and prestige. Nevertheless, the revenge is not carried out: Olvir flees to Harald Fair-hair. Their friendship means that a continuing feud would involve the earl’s family coming into conflict with the king, in which case the opponent would be of a rather different calibre to a farmer’s son.
MAN OF NOBLE BIRTH AND WOMAN OF HUMBLE FAMILY

Bjorgolf is a ‘powerful and wealthy’ baron in Harald Fair-hair’s service, although old at the time he is introduced in the saga. A banquet is held at Bjorgolf’s residence, and among those attending is a farmer by the name of Hogni, who according to the saga is ‘wealthy, outstandingly handsome and wise,’ but ‘came from an ordinary family’ (ES 2000, 14). At the banquet, Bjorgolf sits with Hogni’s beautiful daughter Hildirid. Later that autumn, Bjorgolf comes to Hogni’s farm with thirty men to hold a *lausabrullaup* – ‘a hasty wedding’ – with her. Hogni cannot do anything about this and allows Bjorgulf to wed his daughter. This is emphasised by the fact that Bjorgulf pays ‘an ounce of gold’ for Hildirid (ES 2000, 14), which is less than the statutory amount to be paid by the bridegroom in a marriage contract (Lie 2003, 482).

This episode is first and foremost an example of how yeoman farmers covered several social classes. As Sørensen points out, an ordinary marriage between Hildirid and Bjorgolf would have been socially unacceptable because of the difference in status (1993, 135). For a man of noble family like Bjorgolf it would be simply dishonourable to enter a proper marriage with Hildirid. To underline their lower birth and illegitimate status, Bjorgolf’s sons by Hildirid are uncompromisingly called ‘Hildirid’s sons’ in the saga, i.e. with a matronymic rather than a patronymic surname, as was the custom (ES 2000, 14).

The ‘Hildirid sons’ Harek and Hraerek are denied paternal inheritance by Brynjolf, Bjorgolf’s son from an earlier, legitimate marriage. Later Brynjolf’s son Bard denies them the same, and neither does Thorolf Kvedulfsson allow them any inheritance when he takes over Bard’s farm after his death. This leads to Harek and Hraerek slandering Thorolf to the king. Their lies win the sympathy of the king, and in the end the king kills Thorolf.

Bjorgulf’s ‘hasty wedding’ is not kindly received: ‘his son Brynjolf disapproved of the whole business’ (ES 2000, 14). Brynjolf’s attitude underlines the saga age’s view on the distribution of prestige and status: One should not marry below one’s class, because that involved a loss of prestige and thereby diminished honour. Similarly, one should not try to move above one’s station if one belonged to a lower social class (Sørensen 1993, 132). Harek and Hraerek’s personal shortcomings demonstrate that their origins are too humble to qualify them for a task meant only for men of noble lineage.

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5. A *lausabrullaup* – literally, a ‘loose wedding’ – was an informal wedding where the bride became not much more than the man’s mistress (Lie 2003, 482)
Thus the saga shows a view of status and distribution of prestige as something static. This static system is maintained by notions of honour. Harek and Hraerek take over Thorolf’s farm and duties, but are not up to the task: They collected less tax collection than Thorolf because they had less ‘vegr’ (honour, nobility) than him (ES 2000, 28; see Sørensen 1993, 135 for the sentence in Old Norse). The social equilibrium cannot be upset, and a change in this equilibrium has fatal consequences. This is the case for Hildirid’s sons, who are killed by Ketil Haeng in revenge for the killing of Thorolf (ES 2003, 37–38). In the case of the hasty wedding, it is the farmer Bjorgolf himself who disturbs the social equilibrium, but this disturbance would not have had such serious consequences had it not been for the king’s intervention.

**HARALD FAIR-HAIR AND THE NORWEGIAN NOBLES**

The first of the county kings to fall victim to Harald Fair-hair is king Huntjof. Solvi the Chopper, Huntjof’s son, gives a speech to persuade king Arnvid and his men that they either must ‘follow the course taken by the people of Naumdal who voluntarily entered servitude and became Harald’s slaves’ or ‘defend your property and freedom by staking all the men you can hope to muster […] against such aggression and injustice’ (ES 2000, 10). And he continues: ‘My father felt it an honor [vegr] to die nobly [sæmð] as king of his own realm rather than become subservient to another king in his old age’ (ES 2000, 10; see Sørensen 1993, 138 for the Old Norse terms). Choice and independence are the cornerstones of honour, according to this view: ‘For en mand af ære er den personlige frihed vigtigere end livet’ [For a man of honour, personal freedom is more important than life itself] (Sørensen 1993, 138).

The king’s son Solvi the Chopper describes the choice between fighting or serving the king in terms of a dichotomy: honourable freedom versus dishonourable thraldom. However, another scenario is outlined by Harald Fairhair’s skald, the afore-mentioned Olvir Hump, when he at a later juncture tries to persuade Kveldulf and Skallagrim to enter King Harald’s service. If they do, they will receive ‘great honor from the king,’ and were told ‘how well the king repaid his men with both wealth and status’ (ES 2000, 12). Both Kveldulf and Skallagrim refuse to comply, but Thorolf Kvedulfsson responds differently: ‘It strikes me as odd for such a wise and ambitious man as you, Father, not to be grateful to accept the honor that the king offered you’ (ES 2000, 13). These different attitudes to what is honourable and dishonourable come from two different conceptions of honour.
In the saga the king represents what Stewart calls vertical honour: ‘the right to special respect enjoyed by those who are superior, whether by virtue of their abilities, their rank, their services to the community, their sex, their kin relationship, their office, or anything else’ (1994, 59). The king demands obedience from all the country’s inhabitants and that they should grant him a particular honour. Vertical honour is, as Stewart defines it, an honour that is granted from below by those that acknowledge the superiority of another or of several others. However, in Egil’s saga, vertical honour is portrayed as being given from above, by the king. Nevertheless, it is implicit in the saga that those who enter the service of the king acknowledge him as superior and thus worthy of greater honour. As Sørensen points out, the king’s behaviour is ‘hævet over de normer, der gælder for frie mænds liv, ejendom og ære’ [beyond the norms that apply for the lives, property and honour of free men], which stands in opposition to Norse society’s traditional notion of equality between free men, in principle regardless of the titles of kingship and nobility (1993, 140).

Horizontal honour implies that a person is given ‘the respect […] that is due to an equal’ (Stewart 1994, 54). This view of honour is similar to the one that prevailed in the statutes of the Icelandic Commonwealth (corresponding to the Swedish, Danish and Eastern Norwegian statutes of the time), where all free men and women were equal ‘når det gjaldt retten til kompensation i form av hævn eller bøder for drab eller andre krænkelser’ [as regards the right to compensation in the form of revenge or fines for killings or other offences] (Sørensen 1993, 177). In practice the tendency was more in line with the West Norwegian statutes, where the size of fines varied according to the status of the offended and the offending parties (Sørensen 1993, 185). It is interesting to note that within honour groups it was the possession of freedom rather than of property that was decisive here. In theory, all free men of the same honour group had the same rights and duties to avenge offences.

In the saga we see that the glory and honour the king has to offer demands obedience: King Harald ‘gave them the options of entering his service or leaving the country, or a third choice of suffering hardship or paying with their lives’ (ES 2000, 11). The traditional honour that Kvedulf and Skallagrim adhere to depends on the ‘sideways’ acknowledgement of their peers and presumes the freedom of choice: ‘Bondens ære beror traditionelt på hans ret til frit at bestemme over sin person, sin ejendom og sin familie og dens relationer til omverdenen’ [A yeoman’s honour resided traditionally in his right to decide over himself, his property and his family and its relationship to the outside world] (Sørensen 1993, 144).
In his theory of honour, Alexander Welsh divides the moral spectrum into two categories: obedience and respect (2008, 5). The obedience category implies an acceptance of an authority’s higher status and subordination to its demands. The respect category is based on consensus, and it is this category that Welsh identifies with honour (2008, 5). In the saga the king demands obedience from all members of society and thus removes them from the duties of honour. The honour that demands respect between members of society has no basis any more, because ultimately it is loyalty to the king that gives prestige and ‘honour’. The king excludes himself from the yeomen’s honour group and behaves as if he is no longer bound by the code of honour that initially prevails between all free men.

Vertical and horizontal honour are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can be overlapping categories (Stewart 1994, 61). Thus there is room for vertical honour within the framework of the horizontal honour of traditional Norse society, mainly in the form of titles of nobility, earldom or kingship. For example, Kvedulf acknowledges King Audbjorn’s right to demand services from him by virtue of his superior status (vertical honour), but as free men of equal personal integrity, Kvedulf can also refuse to serve the king when the latter’s demands exceed Kvedulf’s obligations (horizontal honour) (ES 2000, 10).

King Harald Fair-hair, on the other hand, accepts no overlap between vertical and horizontal honour. To use Welsh’s categories, one must choose between obedience and respect. In the course of time, the general development in society, also in Iceland, was towards a sort of vertical conception of honour (see Sørensen 1993, 129, 146). Egil Skallagimsson, for example, a constant opponent of Eirik Bloodaxe’s regime, finally offers to enter the service of king Hakon, Athelstan’s fosterson (ES 2000, 131). By that time, however, the conflict between Egil and the royal lineage has escalated to a level where friendly relations between them are out of the question from the king’s point of view.

**ATHELSTAN AND EGIL**

However, one king that Egil manages to establish friendship with is King Athelstan. Egil and his brother become Athelstan’s liegemen and help him to conquer King Olaf, who poses a serious threat to Athelstan’s rule. Thorolf dies in battle. Egil survives, but is clearly dissatisfied when he sits in King Athelstan’s hall during the victory banquet:

> Egil sat down and put his shield at his feet. He was wearing a helmet and laid his sword across his knees, and now and again he would draw it half-way out
of the scabbard, then thrust it back in. He sat upright, but with his head bowed low. […]

When he was sitting in this particular scene, he wrinkled one eyebrow right down on to his cheek and raised the other up to the roots of his hair. Egil had dark eyes and was swarthy. He refused to drink even when served, but just raised and lowered his eyebrows in turn (ES 2000, 90).

What is the reason for Egil’s strange behaviour? Obviously, the loss of a brother could be expected to have an impact also in Norse times, but Egil’s behaviour is openly hostile to the king he has just been fighting for. With his helmet on his head and his sword halfway out of its sheath, he is clearly picking a fight with the king. King Athelstan’s response is as follows:

King Athelstan was sitting in the high seat, with his sword laid across his knees too. And after they had been sitting there like that for a while, the king unsheathed his sword, took a fine, large ring from his arm and slipped it over the point of the sword, then stood up and walked across the floor and handed it over the fire to Egil (ES 2000, 90).

Egil accepts the gift and seems most satisfied. In addition, King Athelstan gives him two cofferes of silver to take back to Iceland. It seems plausible that this ‘performance’ is about honour: Egil thinks that Athelstan owes him recompense for the loss of his brother. This is at least Athelstan’s justification for one of the cofferes of silver: it is meant as ‘sonargjöld’ – payment for a son – to Kvedulf. Egil will receive ‘bróðurgjöld’ – payment for a brother – from Athelstan, ‘land or wealth, whichever you prefer’ (ES 2000, 91).

At the same time, Athelstan’s presentation of the ring implies a symbolic act. He rises from his throne and walks over to Egil. Although the king has higher status, according to Sørensen the two men are for a moment symbolically equal: there is freedom and equality between them on a personal level (Sørensen 1993, 128). The relationship between King Athelstan and Egil is described as friendly throughout the rest of the saga, with Egil being given the right to decide whether to remain with Athelstan as his liegeman or not (ESS 2000, 121). This shows a

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6. According to Sverre Bagge, friendship in Norse times involved primarily ‘en konkret handling, bl. a. i form av generositet’ [a specific action, for example in the form of generosity] rather than being just a feeling. A Norse friendship was ‘sannsynligvis både det vi ville kalle vennskap og det vi ville kalle allianse’ [probably both what we would call friendship and what we would call an alliance] these days (1986, 153–154).
mixture of vertical and horizontal honour: The king’s superior status to Egil is acknowledged, while at the same time Egil is granted freedom in a relationship where both parties’ personal integrity is respected. This is clearly the saga’s ideal. It is worth noticing that this takes place in the relatively distant setting of England, rather than in Scandinavia (Sørensen 1993, 129). When the saga was written in the 1230s, this was a utopian ideal in Iceland too.

EGIL’S ‘STAKE OF SCORN’

Egil’s conflict with King Eirik is at its worst when Eirik refuses to support Egil in his feud with the king’s liegeman Berg-Onund. Egil responds by killing Berg-Onund and the king’s son Ragnvald. Afterwards Egil places a horse’s head on a pole and thus erects a niðstöng – a ‘stake of scorn’ – against Eirik and Queen Gunnhild and against their subjects until the king and queen are expelled from the country. He carves the nið [scorn] into the pole in runes (ES 2000, 106).

Nið is a ritualized form of verbal abuse which questions a man’s honour by calling him an animal, a thrall, sexually deviant or something similar. The point is to claim that the man the nið is aimed at is not worth the respect of others, and thus is not ‘a man of honour’. The truthfulness of the accusation is not crucial, it is the offence itself (Sørensen 1993, 199). Egil’s nið does not offend Eirik directly through accusation, but rather indirectly through the placing of a horse’s head on a pole to imply a comparison between the horse and the king. At the same time, Egil’s nið is in the nature of a curse, as is emphasised by the carving of runes into the pole.7

Nið must be avenged, no matter what: ‘Hvis ikke hævnen kan gennemføres, så er konsekvensen tab af prestige og status for den krænkede’ [If revenge cannot be accomplished, the consequence is loss of prestige and status for the offended party] (Sørensen 1993, 197). It is interesting to note that Egil’s nið remains standing, unavenged by King Eirik. Hakon, Athelstan’s foster son, takes power in Norway and expels him. Eirik becomes King Athelstan’s landvarnarmaðr [protector of the land] and gets Northumberland as his domain (ES 2000, 109).

Thus it can be said that Egil’s curse works and that Eirik loses his reputation by virtue of both the unavenged offence and his expulsion from the throne of Norway. However, while Eirik does not manage to have his revenge on Egil, his queen

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7. The other occasion in which Egil carves runes in the saga is when he cures a sick girl. A boy has tried to carve a spell to make the girl fall in love with him, but has done it wrong, making her sick. Only when Egil burns the runes the boy has carved, and carves new ones, does the girl recover.
Gunnhild does what she can to facilitate it: ‘It is said that Gunnhild had a magic rite performed to curse Egil Skallagrimsson from ever finding peace in Iceland until she had seen him’ (ESS 2000, 109). The result is that Egil becomes restless, sails to England and is shipwrecked on the coast of the country King Eirik has been made ruler of.

**HOVUDLAUSN – THE HEAD RANSOM**

Egil suddenly finds himself in the clutches of his arch-enemy. He considers escape, but calculates that it would not be possible, ‘considering it unmanly to be caught fleeing like that’ (ESS 2000, 110). Therefore he rides straight to the king’s castle and takes contact with his friend Arinbjorn, who has a close relationship with both Egil and Eirik. Arinbjorn accompanies Egil to the king and asks the king to spare his life. The following day Egil presents a poem in honour of the king, and Arinbjorn says he will fight to protect Egil if the king tries to kill him.

King Eirik is in many ways a cowed man, stripped of power, majesty and honour – at least in comparison with his former position as king of Norway. At the same time, he now has one of his worst enemies exactly where he wants him. Both Arinbjorn and Egil portray Egil’s arrival as intentional. Arinbjorn even claims that Egil is showing the king ‘great honour’ by travelling so far to make reconciliation’ (ES 2000, 111). However, as Tulinius points out, Egil’s offences against Eirik are so great ‘that he deserves execution many times over’ (2014, 149–150). And the king himself says to Egil that he ‘had no hope of my sparing your life’ (ES 2000, 111).

It might seem natural to imagine that it is Egil’s poem, a ‘drápa’ consisting of 20 verses, that saves him from the king’s vengeance. That is also implicit in the name usually given to the poem – Hovudlausn, or Head Ransom, meaning that Egil ransoms his head with a panegyric to the king. However, it is more correct to say that it is Arinbjorn’s defence of Egil that makes Eirik spare him (Tulinius 2014, 149–150; Lie 2003, 285). Arinbjorn is the king’s foster brother and has fostered one of the king’s own sons. This was a well-known method of creating alliances between different classes (Sørensen 1993, 134, 176).

Arinbjorn has served under the king for many years. His obligations to the king are, formally speaking, greater than to Egil. But saga characters ‘agerer […] som individ, ikke som medlem av en gruppe’ [behave […] as individuals, not as members of a group] (Sørensen 1993, 172). Thus Egil’s friendship with Arinbjorn can be more important to him than loyalty to the king; and it seems indeed that it is Egil’s friendship Arinbjorn values most. Sigurdsson calls this sort of friendship ‘fatal’, since it meant a friend might cost you your life (2008, 82).
It is clearly dishonourable for the king not to avenge himself on Egil, even though Egil literally begs the king for a settlement. Egil has killed several of the king’s men and even his son Ragnvald. Even so, the king seems surprisingly passive, probably because Arinbjorn’s support for Egil gives him the choice between two evils: to wreak vengeance on one of his worst enemies and at the same time kill one of his most loyal men, or, on the other hand, to tolerate the dishonour, even if Egil’s poem is a form of compensation. The king chooses to let Egil go. This is clearly against the wishes of Queen Gunnhild.

QUEEN OF HONOUR

On several occasions Queen Gunnhild is portrayed as the one with the gift of the gab and with the clearest understanding of what the code of honour requires of her husband. She points out what dishonour it will bring if Eirik lets Egil go and argues that Arinbjorn has been richly rewarded for his service to the king and thus owes more loyalty to the latter than to Egil (ES 2000, 114).

Gunnhild’s position is both similar and in contrast to other women in the saga. Hildirid and Solveig are from relatively humble and noble backgrounds respectively, but in both cases their marriage is determined solely by the men of the family. Gunnhild’s marriage to King Eirik is referred to in similar terms: ‘One spring Eirik Blood-axe made preparations for a journey to Permia […]. and on the same journey he married Gunnhild, daughter of Ozur Snout, and brought her back home with him’ (ES 2000, 59). As an unmarried woman she is an object like the other women in the saga. However, right from her first mention, Gunnhild appears in a special light, described as being not only ‘outstandingly attractive,’ but also ‘wise, and well versed in the magic arts’ (ES 2000, 59).

There are several occasions where Gunnhild seems more preoccupied with honour than the king. When at the beginning of his reign King Eirik allows Egil to remain in Norway after killing the king’s liegeman Bard, Gunnhild reproaches him: ‘Even though you happen to think Bard’s killing was insignificant, I don’t’ (ES 2000, 77). Gunnhild shows herself to be an exemplary case of the strong saga woman who, while excluded from the arena of violence herself, goads her husband to action (Sigurdsson 2008, 87). In the conflict between Berg-Onund and Egil, the king intends to let the courts decide the outcome, whereupon Gunnhild openly scorns the king’s lack of initiative: ‘How peculiar of you, King, to let this big man Egil run circles around you. Would you even raise an objection if he claimed the throne out of your hands?’ (ESS 2000, 98).
Gunnhild uses here traditional goading, often termed *fryja* or *hvotr* in Old Norse, which bears many similarities to *nið* since it often involves a man being accused of womanliness or of lack of initiative in defending his and the family’s honour (Sørensen 1993, 238–239, 245). Goading is always directed towards the man and comes from someone close to him who is unable to carry out the necessary revenge themselves. Often it is the mother or the wife that goads, but it can also be the father. The purpose is to direct revenge against a third party; the aim of Queen Gunnhild’s goading is to get Eirik to take revenge on Egil (Sørensen 20013, 239).

If revenge is not carried out, it means, according to Sørensen, that the offended and offending parties have swapped esteem and status (Sørensen 1993, 197). This is probably what is meant in Gunnhild’s reproach: ‘Would you even raise an objection if he claimed the throne out of your hands?’ We can interpret the comment as meaning that failure to avenge will lead to Egil swapping status with Eirik.

Unlike the average woman, Gunnhild is not satisfied with just being a ‘guardian of honour’ (Sigurdsson 2008, 87). When her husband does not act, she goes a step further and gives the orders she thinks should have been given. She commands her two brothers to kill ‘one of Skallagrim’s sons, or preferably both’ (ES 2000, 78). When the king wants to allow Egil to bring a legal case against Berg-Onund, it is Gunnhild who breaks up the court: ‘Where are you now, Alf Askmann [Gunnhild’s brother]? Take your men to where the court is sitting and prevent this injustice from coming to pass’ (ES 2000, 98).

Here she goes beyond the traditional woman’s role and assumes male characteristics. Honour could demand that of a woman if her husband was too lax about defending honour: The ideal woman of the Sagas of Icelanders can ‘overskrider grænser til mandens kønsrolle’ [transgress the border to the male role] when honour requires it (Sørensen 1993, 237–238). At the same time, this transgression marks the border between the sexes. When Eirik’s honour and prestige are at stake in his last meeting with Egil, Gunnhild has no real power: Egil leaves the king’s hall unharmed.

THE FEMALE SKALD

On Egil’s journey to Varmland, he and his men spend the night with a farmer called Armot. Armot serves the travellers soured milk and pretends that is all he has, but the wife and daughter tell Egil, in a poem recited by the daughter, that he should soon ‘expect to be served something better’. And sure enough, there is
soon plenty of food and drink, ‘ale was brought in, an exceptionally strong brew’ (ES 2000, 138). Egil’s men are plied with ale until it makes them unwell, and Egil ends up drinking the ale they are served, because it is bad manners not to drink what the host offers.

Finally, Egil can take no more. He walks across the floor to Armot and vomits in his face. Armot, himself the worse for wear, responds by vomiting on Egil. After this, Armot walks out, leaving Egil and his men to sit drinking throughout the night. At daybreak Egil goes over to where Armot is sleeping and draws his sword to kill him. But the wife and daughter beg him to spare his life. «Egil said he would spare him for their sake — ‘That is the fair thing to do, but if he were worth the bother I would kill him’» (ES 2000, 140).

As well as illustrating notions of honourable hospitality and the possible consequences of shortcomings in this area, the episode shows Egil’s acknowledgement of Armot’s wife and daughter. Could it be said that the women here behave with honour and are seen as repositories of honour? It is evident, at least, that Egil refrains from killing Armot because the women, unlike the host, have shown courtesy and hospitality, and that Armot would have lost his life if it had not been for them.

Could it be said that the wife and daughter perform a sort of exchange of gifts with Egil, where the women’s revealing of Armot’s lie is repaid by Egil by sparing the host’s life? As historian Sverre Bagge points out, the exchange of gifts presupposes a basic equality (1986, 154). When the exchange happens between unequal parties, the difference in status is made apparent by one of the gifts being greater than the other, for example material goods versus loyalty. The ‘gift’ the wife and daughter give to Egil (hospitality) is less than the one Egil gives them by sparing Armot’s life, thus underlining his superior status. Egil’s acknowledgement of the women’s conduct is perhaps an appreciation of their integrity, on a par with what was usually reserved for men of honour.

It is assumed that honour on the part of women, if it existed, was an upper class phenomenon (Sigurdsson 2008, 87). Armot seems to be a wealthy farmer, but not so powerful that Egil cannot find his way to his bedchamber unhindered. Armot’s lineage is not mentioned, probably a sign that he is not of noble birth (Sørensen 2003, 175). Thus the episode underlines a respect for and an acknowledgement of women that do not belong to the upper class. On the other hand, we see that whatever ‘honour sentiment’ there is, it takes a different form with these women than with Queen Gunnhild: Armot’s wife and daughter do not openly chide the lord of the house and neither do they goad him to respond to Egil’s insult. The reasons for this might be that such chiding can be interpreted as an offence against Armot, or
that Armod is not much of a match for Egil. If the daughter’s poem about there
soon being served better food and drink is to be interpreted as a reproach to her
father, he certainly dismisses it by giving her a cuff (ES 2000, 140).

The demonstration of a form of ‘honour’ by Armod’s wife and daughter is prob-
ably a result of the lack of it on the part of the master of the house. Armod shows
himself to be simply an ‘honourless’ man. Egil emphasizes this by cutting off
‘Armod’s beard close to the chin’ and gouging ‘out one of his eyes with his finger,
leaving it hanging on his cheek’ (ES 2000, 140). The beard cutting is a concrete
expression of the accusation often implicit in níð, namely that the man has femi-
nine characteristics. Similarly it could be said that Armod’s wife and daughter
assume ‘masculine’ characteristics by behaving as close to the ideal of a male host
as was possible for them. When Armod’s daughter expresses greetings from her
mother to Egil in the form of a poem, this can also have been a way of demonstrat-
ing honour to Egil.

In a continuation of the tradition from the Viking Age, poems in 13th century
Iceland were used ‘til at kaste glans over både digteren og digtets gjenstand’ [to
add lustre to both the poet and the object of the poem] (Sørensen 1993, 107).
Skaldic verses were revered by Icelandic scholars just as classical Roman poetry
was and ‘repræsenterede også i sin menneskeopfattelse og etik noget, der i
højmiddelalderen måtte opleves som oprindeligt islandsk, og som et naturligt led
i sagaernes fremstilling af mennesker og deres bedrifter’ [represented in their eth-
ics and perspective on humanity something that in the High Middle Ages was seen
as authentically Icelandic, and as a natural element in sagas’ portrayal of people

Egil Skallagrimsson distinguishes himself by reciting a poem in the approved
fashion at the age of three (ES 2000, 51–52). Armod’s daughter is ‘aged ten or
eleven’ when she presents her poem to Egil (ES 2000, 138). Although he is in a
class of his own both by virtue of being a man and having presented a verse at a
much younger age, there is a striking parallel. The fact that Armod’s daughter can
present a verse places her in an old tradition with a cultural value on a par with
classical European poetry. Skalds often came from ‘distinguished families’ that
were ‘usually richly rewarded by kings’ for their poems, which bears witness to
the prestige skaldic poetry had in Norse times (Sigurdsson 2008, 179). The fact
that a girl is presented as having such talents means that she is elevated to a sphere
of prestige and skills normally reserved for men. This is all the more striking con-
sidering that Armod’s daughter is otherwise so insignificant that the saga does not
even mention her name.
THE EARL’S POET DAUGHTER

When Egil is banqueting in Earl Arnfinn’s hall, he is placed, by drawing lots, next to the earl’s ‘attractive and nubile’ daughter. While she is occupied with walking ‘around, keeping herself amused’, Egil sits on her seat and when she returns she composes an insulting verse about him: ‘What do you want my seat for? / You have not often fed wolves with warm flesh […]’. Egil answers her with a verse that responds to the insults, and they have a merry time together the rest of the evening (ES 2000, 76).

Here the earl’s daughter demonstrates her superior status to Egil, even reciting a verse with clear similarities to poetic níð. If she had been a man, Egil would probably have avenged the offence with his sword. He chooses to respond with a verse presumably because she is a woman. Thus their ‘verse sparring’ is seen as an expression of the young woman asking who Egil thinks he is, and Egil answering and thereby demonstrating that he is a capable fellow, no less gifted than her and a match for any man in terms of accomplishments.

With regard to the rare examples of young women being portrayed as independent individuals, Sørensen concludes: ‘Den ugifte kvinde har […] som litterært motiv fået en værdi i sig selv; men i almindelighed har hun mindre vægt i islændingesagaerne end den unge, ugifte mand’ [As a literary motif […] the unmarried woman achieves a value of her own; but usually she has less focus in the Sagas of Icelanders than young, unmarried men] (1993, 230). In Egil’s saga, the daughters of Armod and Arnfinn achieve just such a literary value. As was the case with the ‘equal’ friendship between King Athelstan and Egil, the daughters of Armod and Earl Arnfinn are both situated in distant locations and a distant past. The women may represent a utopian ideal of a relationship between a man and a woman based on the art of the skald, where artistic skills are given most emphasis. Should one of the parties suffer an offence, violence is not an option because of the gender difference. However, should insults of the sort the earl’s daughter utters be presented man to man, quite a different response is required of the offended party.

HONOUR AND THE CHRISTIAN – OBEDIENCE AND RESPECT, MORALS AND HONOUR

In our preliminary quote, Thorstein kills the thrall Thrand because he grazes another farmer’s animals on Thorstein’s land. Before the killing, honour is explicitly mentioned in the exchange between the two when Thrand says: ‘You’re more stupid than I thought, Thorstein, if you want to risk your honor by seeking a place
to sleep for the night under my axe’ (ES 2000, 171). However, Thorstein manages to kill the thrall, and also emerges as victor from the feud with the thrall’s owner.

The saga tells us that Thorstein ‘stood firm if others imposed on him’ (ES 2000, 180), a clear indication that he adhered to his society’s notions of honour also after the killing of Thrand. There is clearly no contradiction between this and the reference to him in the saga’s epilogue where we are told that he ‘was baptized when Christianity came to Iceland’ and ‘was a devout and orderly man’ (ES 2000, 184).

When Christianity was introduced, the material and political conditions in Icelandic society were not greatly different from what had prevailed in Norway before the advent of the monarchy and in Iceland during the settlement period. It was still up to every man to protect his property and his honour, regardless of whether Iceland adopted a new religion. Thorstein Egilsson thus had no material reasons not to ‘hold his own if anyone went against him’, and it seems reasonable to suppose that he followed the pre-Christian ideals of honour just as much after embracing Christianity as before.

Steblin-Kamensky maintains that honour in the form that emerged in Norse society was due to the lack of a ‘public penal system’ of punishment that could safeguard the wellbeing of its citizens (1975, 106). From this perspective, conceptions of honour were the very prerequisite for a society if it was to maintain a certain degree of peace. In theory, when royal power was consolidated and a monopoly of violence established, the need for these notions of honour disappeared. The life and property of each citizen was now protected by the state, rather than by each individual (Steblin-Kamensky 1975, 107).

Using Welsh’s concepts, Iceland’s transition to a vassal state under the Norwegian crown could be said to lead to a development from a more or less egalitarian honour-based society founded on mutual respect to a hierarchical society based on obedience to the authorities. The distinction between obedience and respect corresponds to the distinction that Sørensen points out between morals and honour, where he emphasises that morals are ‘funderet i overordnede autoriteter, først og fremmest den kristne læres’ [based on superior authorities, primarily Christian teachings], while honour traditionally ‘har deres fundament i den offentlige mening’ [has its foundation in public opinion] and as such is determined by a form of equality (1993, 308).

However, the distinction between morals and honour, or obedience and respect, obscures the fact that honour could be conceived as having pre-eminence. When honour is referred to as ‘ein moralsk skyldnad’ [a moral duty] by Steblin-Kamensky (1975, 93), ‘absolutive imperatives’ by Bowman (2006, 27) and ‘a kind of moral imperative’ by Welsh (2008, ix), it implies that honour is closely connected
with morality. It is also difficult to see why honour cannot just as easily be associated with something external, like moral conceptions, as something internal for the individual.\(^8\) When Sørensen comments that the hero in the classical saga is *unable* to show weakness for the sake of his reputation, this may point in the same direction (1993, 329). The notion that respect assumes equality between the involved parties is not necessarily inherent in the concept. Perhaps Stewart’s concepts of vertical and horizontal honour are more applicable also when defining honour, as he does, as ‘a right to respect’, whether from your equals or your inferiors/superiors (1994, 21).

The saga’s relatively deadpan remarks about Thorstein’s honour and Christian conversion indicate that the introduction of Catholic Christianity did not mean a sudden break with notions of honour. However, in western culture Christianity contributed significantly to a weakening of the concept of honour, standing in constant tension to it. This was because honour in ‘primitive’ societies (like pre-Christian Scandinavia) was understood as ‘bravery, indominability and the readiness to avenge insults or injuries for men’, which was never compatible with Christianity, ‘the religion of humility and turning the other cheek’, according to Bowman (2006, 21).\(^9\) In the west, Christianity’s constant pressure on honour culture forced it into a value system that made it quite distinct from honour in non-Christian societies. For example, the Catholic Church in Iceland actively opposed the conceptions of honour that prevailed in contemporary society. It called for humility, urging people to refrain from defending personal and family honour – according to Sigurdsson, ‘a powerful attack on the traditional conception of honour’ (2008, 85).

**CONCLUSION**

Norse concepts of honour as demonstrated in *Egil’s saga* are part of an intricate system that both encompasses and is encompassed by gender, social prestige, status and descent. The saga exhibits two views of honour that intersect each other: The ‘horizontal’ view that was hung on to in Iceland and the ‘vertical’ view which prevailed when Iceland became a vassal state under the Norwegian crown.

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\(^8\) This may possibly be connected to the distinction between external and internal honour. This distinction is thoroughly explained, discussed and rejected by Stewart (1994, 12–21).

\(^9\) Bowman’s formulation of the universal teaching of honour is: ‘You can’t expect, when you get somebody, that they won’t get you back’ (1). This directly contradicts Jesus’ commandment: ‘If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer him the other one as well, and if someone takes your coat, don’t keep back your shirt, either!’ (Luke 6, 29).
Kveldulf and later Skallagrim are portrayed as ‘men of honour’ in the horizontal sense when they set the boundaries of their loyalty, demanding a freedom the king cannot accept. Egil shows the same attitude to honour, but moves inexorably towards accepting a form of vertical honour, primarily by offering his services to King Hakon.

The saga portrays women as objects, among them Solveig the fair and Hildirid. However, the saga’s depiction of women as objects is more a reflection of historical realities than discriminating generalisations. Female honour may be seen expressed in Gunnhild’s goading of King Eirik. But she steps beyond this and takes a most unusual role for a woman when she gives orders to the king’s men and plans to kill Egil and his brother. In addition to this traditional manifestation of female honour, the episodes involving Armód’s and Earl Arnfinn’s daughters show that poetry, or, more specifically, the art of the skald, is an arena where the saga allows for greater respect and acknowledgement of women’s skills.

When seen as objects, women are property on a par with other possessions. If a man assaults a woman, it is the woman’s closest relation that has the moral duty to avenge the offence. There are many similarities here with what in modern terminology is called ‘sex honour’, and with the honour killings that result from it. However, in the saga women are excluded from the violence, and vengeance is perpetrated not against the woman who, as the object of the offence, inflicts dishonour on the family, but against the man who, as the subject of the offence, inflicts a loss of family honour. Solveig’s brothers therefore direct their revenge on Olvir, not on Solveig, when he writes poems about her.

Marriage to Solveig would have meant increased prestige for Olvir. One of the fundamental problems of the notion of honour is that a man must avenge an offence. A man who remains passive in a competition over prestige between men loses honour and is thus not worthy of respect from his fellow human beings. However, a man’s place in this ‘competition of honour’ is still associated with certain social duties and tasks based on social status, which in turn is related to family relationships. It is apparently Olvir’s descent that stands in the way of his marriage to Solveig. Olvir fails with regard to the most important means of acquiring honour: namely taking honour from men who have a higher status and prestige. By contrast, Egil manages on several occasions to inflict a loss of honour on others, thus gaining honour at their expense, not least through his níð towards Eirik which is never properly avenged.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Another example is the duel with Berg-Onund, where Egil kills one of the king’s men and appropriates his property.
Honour in the saga is interwoven with what Sørensen calls ‘personal integrity’ (1993, 180). As such, notions of honour were an expression of every individual’s right to maintain his integrity, his helgi. Every person with a statutory right to honour, which in the saga and in Icelandic society meant free men and women, also had the right to protect this honour with life and limb – and could, with the law on their side, kill another person for an insult.

Such attitudes stand in sharp contrast to Christianity’s ideals of humility. Catholic Christianity and Norse conceptions of honour are not portrayed as incompatible in Egil’s saga, although that does not necessarily mean that the saga writer saw Christian values and conceptions of honour as mutually compatible. It is part of the ‘objective’ style of the Sagas of Icelanders that the narrator abstains from comment on what is being told, letting the tale speak for itself. In reality, the traditional honour culture was actively opposed by the Catholic Church in Iceland. In the course of time, the influence of Catholicism contributed to a weakening of honour as a cultural phenomenon in society.

Honour is still crucial in Egil’s saga and is portrayed as a system that is present in every social connection, in every meeting between people. A host who denies his guests good food and drink, a man who sings of his love for a woman, a thrall herding sheep on the wrong ground – all of them challenge the person they encounter to choose between revenge or loss of honour. Thus in the Sagas of Icelanders a world is revealed where it was to be expected that honour was involved in all dealings with other human beings. Even when conflicts could be resolved peacefully, a man perceived publicly as having been offended against would often have to respond violently in order to maintain honour – sometimes regardless of whether he felt offended or not. On many occasions in Egil’s saga notions of honour lead to the individual asserting his right to integrity at the expense of the well-being of others. If a person is to prove his right to respect, his actions must be ruthless and unambiguous. The price of integrity is therefore often paid at the expense of another’s life.
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