

The Importance of Kinship in the Viking Society

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Kinship was a very important aspect of Viking society. Kinship played a major role in the development of the region during the Viking Age. It played a major role in the everyday lives of Scandinavian people, and the strength that comes with extensive kinship was essential to holding and wielding power. Much of the society was structured around kinship, including laws, which tended to be interpreted so as to favor those with a larger kinship group that was more powerful. This in turn helped to preserve the structure of society by usually insuring that the more powerful families would stay in power and keeping it from being turned upside down by relatively low class individuals.

Kinship is an idea that involved two groups of family. These groups were the *ætt* (the ancestral line) and *odal* (the patrimonial group) (Vestergaard 21). The direct ancestral group was often partially extended through foster relationships, and also through ceremonies that had the people involved cut themselves and mix their blood in a ring of earth, as was seen in *Gisli Surrson's* saga (Foote, Wilson 422). The family group and its lands were most often ruled over by the most promising male member who was then assisted by his kin group and any dependents. The idea of kinship, and that power belonged to the family instead of the individual was key to the success of both the family and the society in the Viking Age (Dommasnes 69). Kinship served as protection and also helped to expand the power of the family. When a man and a woman were married, they were considered to be tied by kinship to both their immediate family and their partner's family.

The sagas are some of the best ways to get information regarding the value of kinship. Many family sagas, such as *The Saga Of The People Of Laxardal*, portray the conflict that arises when kinship in the family is no longer as important as it was. The main theme of *The Saga Of The People Of Laxardal* is the failing of relationships between the families, especially the conflict between the illegitimate and the legitimate family line. This conflict continually causes the families to split further apart and fall into an internal feud. We further see examples of the damage that is done to the family in the escalating warfare, specifically when the character Bolli kills his cousin and foster-brother Kjartan (who refused to fight Bolli, thus leading to his death by Bolli's sword). Later on, Bolli is then killed by Kjartan's kinsmen and a couple of his own that were partly responsible for Kjartan's death (*The Saga Of The People Of Laxardal*). These two outcomes can be seen as the climax of the conflict, as in Scandinavian society the killing of one's own kinsman was the absolute worst thing that could happen inside a family and in the community. This type of crime led to the individual responsible being cast out from society, or worse, it was often the cause of family feuds (both inter-family and intra-family) which led to the destruction of entire households. An example of this is found in *Njal's Saga*, where the Njalssons are manipulated by the plotting of Mord, which brings them to kill their foster-brother Hoskuld Hvitanes-Priest. Hoskuld's wife, Hildigunn, goads her uncle Flosi into taking action for the death of her husband. She does this as there is no one that is related to Hoskuld that could bring a case against the Njalssons. The person who should have led the prosecution was Hoskuld's foster-father Njal because

Hoskuld's father, Thrain, had been killed several years back by the Njalssons. Instead, Njal was defending his sons, and he could not be both the prosecution and defense. The laws of Iceland had no guidelines for actions brought inside a kin group, which is seen in this case. It was considered unimaginable for a breakdown of family relations to go that far. The repercussions from the slaying of Hoskuld eventually end in the whole of Njal's immediate family being killed by Flosi and his supporters.

Viking Age society valued kinship highly for a number of reasons. One of the reasons was power. The more kinsmen a family had, the more supporters it had. This was especially important when a legal case was brought against someone. There was a common law and courts in Iceland to which law cases could be brought for grievances caused to someone. This process was overseen by a group of twelve or more people depending on the severity of the crime. The people stating the case told the jury what they believed was the truth. After the case was stated, the jury then decided whether or not the person in question was guilty or innocent. When this was decided, it was then the law-sayer's duty to rule on what the law said about the crime. If the accused was determined to be guilty, he would then be fined or declared an outlaw (Foote, Wilson 58). This was where kinship could be extremely useful. If a litigant had someone in his kinship group who was much more powerful, greatly needed support could be gained for the accused. The support of those tied to a person in kinship easily meant the difference between outlawry and a cash settlement if he were found guilty. This was also true in the case of whoever was bringing the case against the person. If

the prosecutor had a large group of supporters, then the case against the accused was considered that much more powerful. Another benefit of kinship was the ability to execute the court's decision. There was no group of people or body that was designed to pursue the judgment awarded those who had won the case. It was ultimately the responsibility of those who brought the case to gather their settlement, or kill the person if he had been outlawed by the court. Being outlawed also meant that it was illegal to seek help or protection from anyone, even their kinsmen.

Though kinship was extremely helpful in society, there were problems that could arise with having a large kinship base. The breakdown of relations within a kinship group became a major problem as society continued to grow. As tensions inside the families grew, those involved constantly had to choose sides inside of the family against one another due to their kin obligations, most often at times when there was an intra-family slaying. The sagas provide numerous examples of the slow but constant breakdown of family values, such as in the previous example from *The Saga Of The People Of Laxardal*, *Njal's Saga*, and also in *Gisli Sursson's Saga*. In the saga we see the failure of an attempted blood-brother ceremony between Gisli, Thorkel, Vestein, and Thorgrim. They are all tied together at least through extended family, yet Thorgrim refuses to enter into the agreement with Vestein. This was an understandable action because chieftains had to selectively choose to whom they would give support and to whom they wouldn't. However understandable this decision may be, the failure of them to commit to blood-brotherhood leads to the murders of both Vestein, and Thorgrim,

and eventually the outlawing of Gisli and his death by kinsmen of Thorgrim seeking restitution. There is also an example seen in *The Saga Of The People Of Laxardal*. As discussed earlier, after Kjartan is killed by Bolli in the saga, kinsmen of Bolli who had assisted in the slaying then participate in the killing of Bolli. The break up of kinship and family ties, like those in the examples, is one of the reasons that caused Iceland to descend into civil strife and ultimately helped cause their giving-up of sovereignty to Norway in order to try and keep their society from destroying itself. This break-up also has been attributed to the major social change and conflicts within the church in Iceland when it converted from paganism to Christianity, as the role of religion in everyday life had abruptly changed in a few short years (Wax 35-37).

From the sagas we are able to gather that kinship was one of the highly valued concepts of the Viking Age. In the beginning, when family values were still greatly emphasized, kinship was a major factor in the rise of Scandinavian society and the success of their culture as traders, explorers, farmers, and raiders. Kinship continued to play an integral part in their everyday life and concept of family, even when it was causing conflict between family members and other families. Indeed, kinship helped to accelerate the growth of the Viking Age, but from the stories recorded in the sagas, kinship, and other aspects such as religious conflicts, also led to the breakdown of family ties and helped to bring about the end of the Viking Age and the decline of the power in Scandinavian countries, especially Iceland (Foote, Wilson 64).

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