



Mixed Emotions

The Trouble with Royal
Blood in *Laxdæla saga*.

Torfi H. Tulinius

University of Iceland

BLOODTAKING AND PEACEMAKING

FEUD, LAW, AND SOCIETY
IN SAGA ICELAND



William Ian Miller

Social anxiety in the sagas

“Impressive ancestry and wealth only provided a presumption of deference; people still had to show themselves worthy of their blood and their means. People were thus ever anxious about the state of their own positions and ever jealous of the attainments of others. Such, at least, is the picture the sagas present where so much of the motive and style of discord and dispute is a function of the inherent insecurity of social rank and status.” (p. 29)



A “parangon amongst women”.

Unn the deep-minded distributes land to her followers.



The “Queen of Iceland”



“Next morning Olaf Feilan went to his grandmother’s bedroom. When he entered, Unn was sitting propped up against the pillows; she was dead. Olaf went back into the hall and announced the news; everyone thought it was impressive how Unn had kept her dignity to her dying day.”

Höskuldur Dala-Kollsson

- Rich farmer.
- Dominates his valley.
- Marries Jórunn.
- Has three legitimate children with her:
 - Þorleikur
 - Hallgerður
 - Bárður



“The women were all sitting in a row across the booth, and he inspected them carefully. The one sitting right at the edge of the tent caught his eye; she was shabbily dressed, but Hoskuld thought her beautiful, from what he could see.

‘How much would that woman cost, if I wanted to buy her?’

‘You’d have to pay three marks of silver for her,’ replied Gilli.

Illustration by Uno Stallarholm





It so happened one morning...

It so happened one morning that Hoskuld was out of doors seeing to his farm; it was a fine day, and the dawn sun was shining. He heard the sound of voices and went over to the stream at the foot of the sloping homefield. There he saw two people he knew well; it was his son Olaf, and the boy's mother. He realized then that she was not speechless at all, for she was talking busily to the child. Hoskuld now went over to them and asked her what her name was, and told her that there was no point in concealing it any longer.

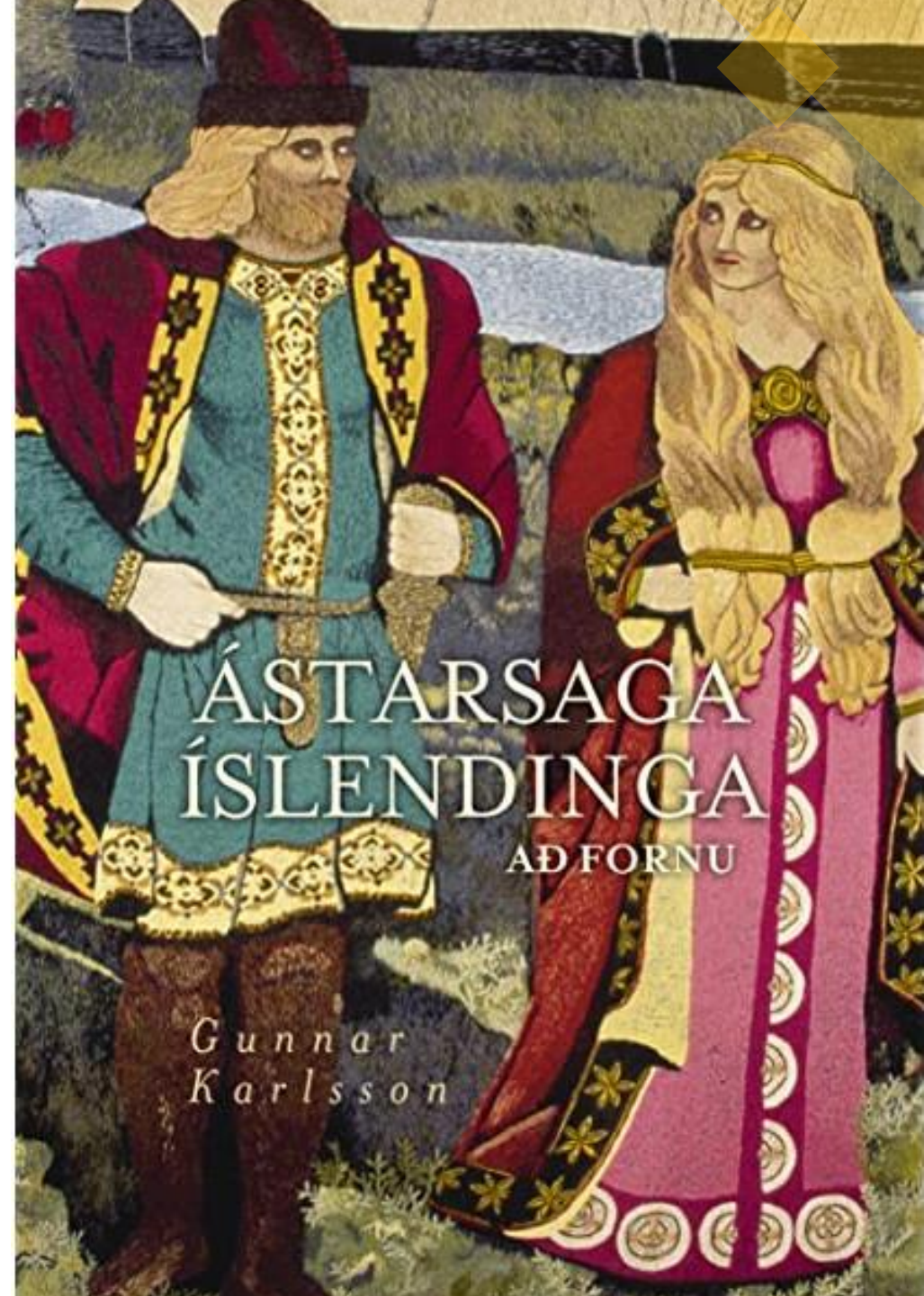
Jórunn's reaction to Höskuldr's concubine

- Asks her husband about the slave girl. He is upfront about it. She comments on her disability.
- Höskuldr sleeps in Jórunn's bed when at home and is distant with the young woman.
- Everyone notices her qualities (*stórmennskumót*) and intelligence (*enginn afglapi*)
- When Melkorka gives birth to most beautiful boy, Jórunn wants her to work or to leave. She is given the task of serving the couple in the house.
- When it is discovered that Melkorka is the daughter of a king, she strikes her.
- Melkorka strikes back and is given a separate home of her own.

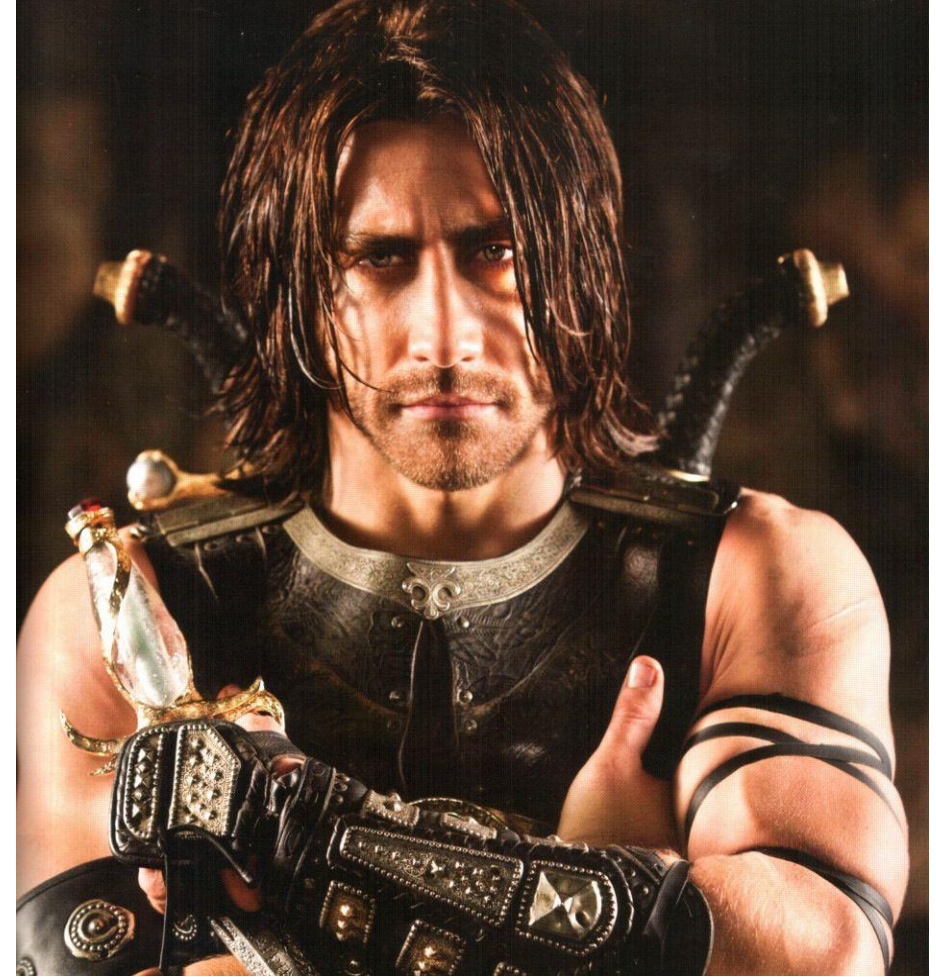


Jealousy?

- In an article from 1963, Hermann Pálsson, interpreted the altercation between the two women as a fit of mutual jealousy. They were fighting over Höskuldr.
- In a book written half a century later, Gunnar Karlsson describes Jórunn's reaction as "the healthy jealousy of a wife" (heilbrigð afbrýðisemi eiginkonu). Both writers seem to believe that emotions such as a wife's jealousy are historical constants.
- Is that what Jórunn's violent reaction is about?



Best friends: Kjartan and Bolli



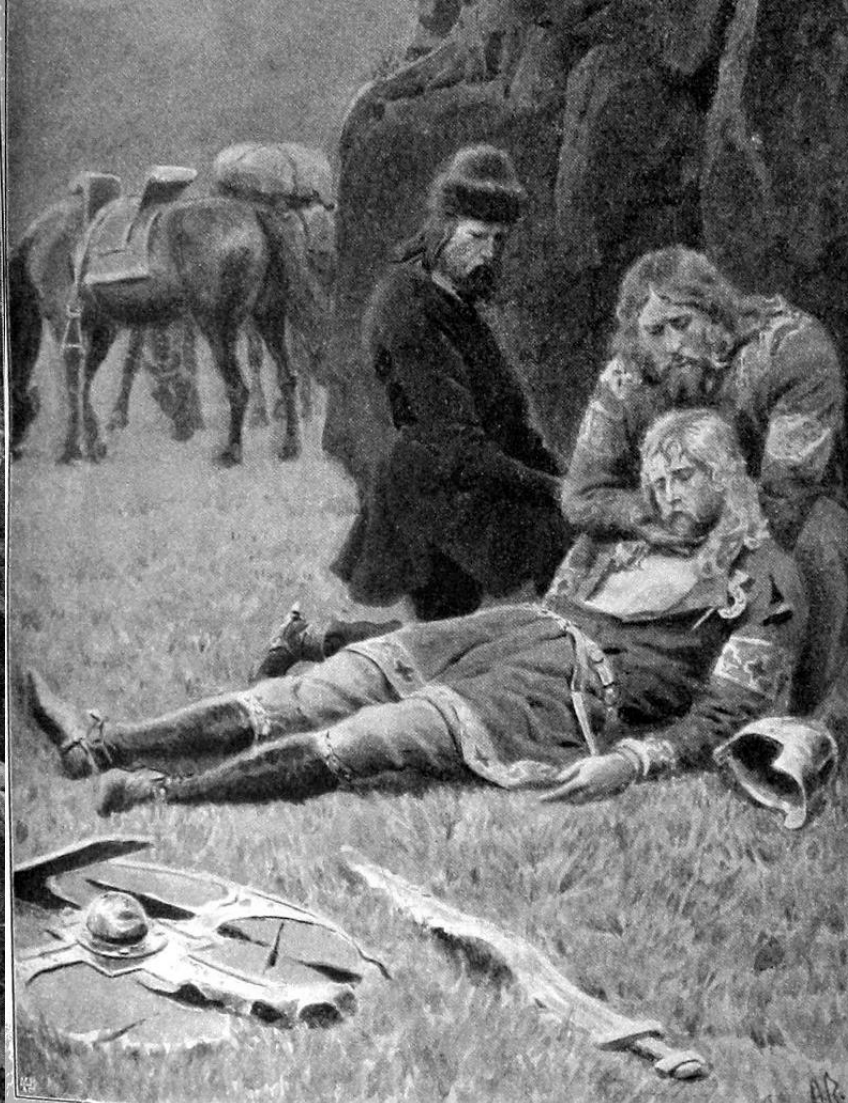
Female fashion



Kjartan, Bolli and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir



- Kjartan courts Guðrún.
- She wants him as her third husband.
- He will not allow her to accompany him to Norway but asks her not to marry while he is away.
- He is detained in Norway by his friendship with the king and his sister.
- Bolli returns to Iceland and Guðrún is pressured into marrying him.



A. Bloch

A tragic love triangle

Disruption by royal blood

- Höskuldur is bona fide nobility, great-grandson through his mother of a Viking king of Scotland.
- He has legitimate children, i.a. Þorleikur whose son is Bolli.
- He has an illegitimate son, Ólafur, who is the grandson of an Irish king on his mother's side. His son is Kjartan.
- Kjartan's royal blood makes him eligible for marrying a princess in Norway.
- He is betrayed by his close friend Bolli who marries Guðrún, the only woman in Iceland noble enough to marry him.
- She cannot forgive having lost out on being married to a quasi-king.
- Kjartan is killed and equilibrium is restored into society.
- After having avenged Bolli, she marries a scion of the dominant family in the region, a direct male descendant of Unn's son.

Is this aspect of *Laxdæla saga* more important than hitherto has been measured?



A FINANCIAL TIMES BOOK OF THE YEAR

BLOOD ROYAL

DYNASTIC POLITICS
IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

ROBERT
BARTLETT

'bears all
the hallmarks
of a classic'
Litvrey Review

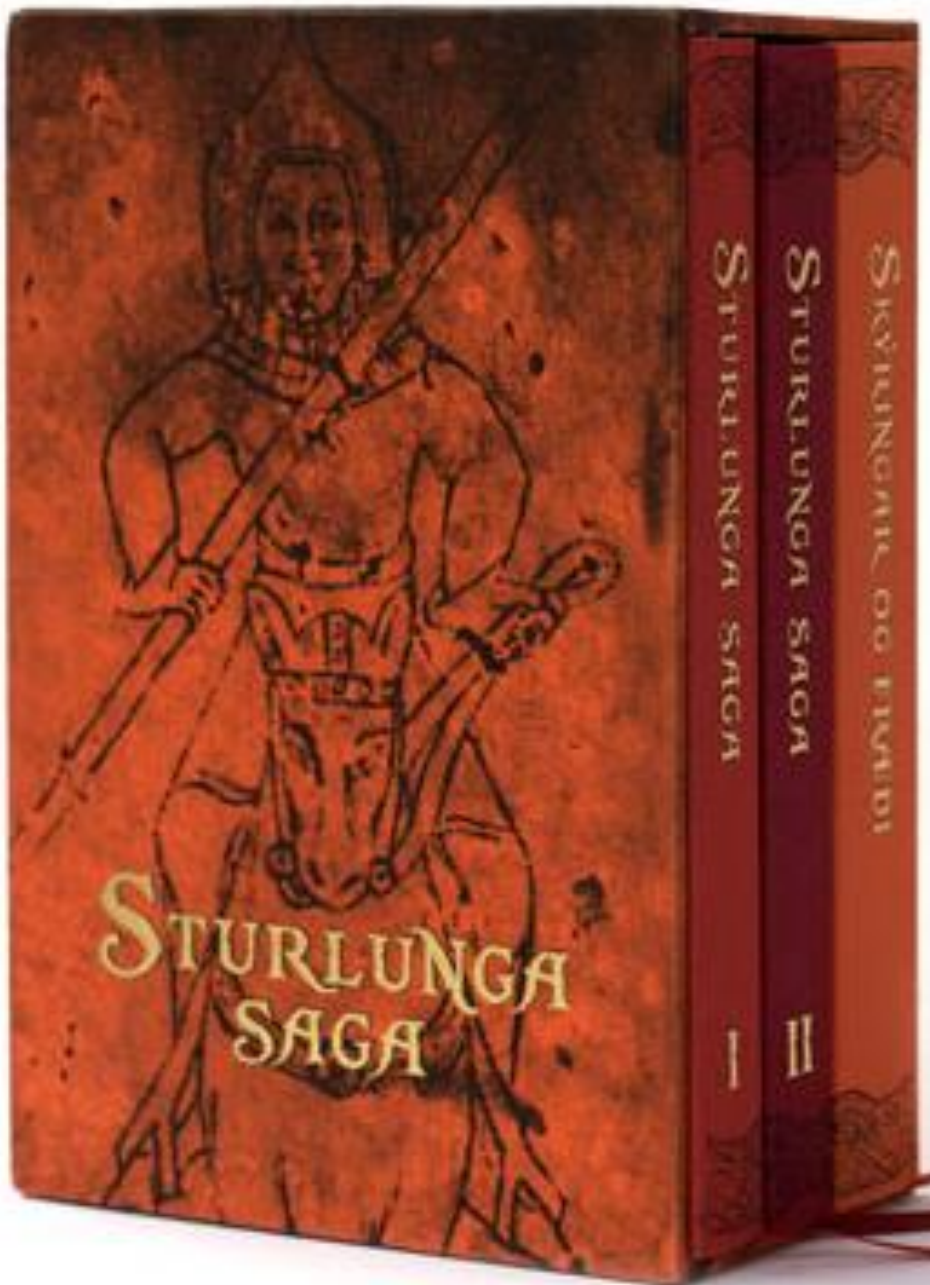
Royal blood in medieval Europe

- Having royal blood is necessary to inherit the kingdom.
- The king is of a special family, and is in some sense sacred, though individual kings must also deserve their rank:
 - Dynasty
 - Sacrality
 - Worthiness.
 - Andrew W. Lewis, *Royal Succession in Capetian France*, 104-154.
- Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi* p. 171:
 - There is a difference between kings and other people, and Icelanders knew this in the 13th century.

Royal blood in Iceland

- The grandson of a king: Jón Loftsson
 - His progeny has royal blood
 - Gissur Þorvaldsson
 - Sólvieg Sæmundardóttir
 - Her brothers: Hálfván, Fillipus, etc.
- The competition for „royal“ wives:
 - Granddaughters of Jón Loftsson
- Who can become jarl?
 - Hirðskrá: either consanguine or close affine (námágr).
 - „Sá er hinn fyrsti háttur á er Noregs konungur gefur sonum sínum skilgetnum jarla nafn, en stundum bræðrum sínum skilgetnum eða námágum.“ (NGL 501-507).





Who will become *jarl* over Iceland?

- Snorri had plans: he is the first Icelander to become a baron of the Norwegian realm (*lendr maðr*) in 1222.
- He promised the king to bring Iceland under Norwegian rule.
- His nephew, Sturla Sighvatsson married a woman with royal blood.
- He promises to bring Iceland under Norwegian rule in 1235.
- He is killed by Gissur in 1238.
- Gissur Þorvaldsson, becomes *jarl* of Iceland in 1258.

Women and agency in Laxdæla saga



- Begins and ends with an impressive woman.
- Both have preserved the family's honor and standing.
- Guðrún was frustrated in her longings.
- As a Christian, she had to repent for her deeds.
- She treated him worst whom she loved the most.