

**Háskóli Íslands**  
**Hugvísindasvið**  
**Viking and Medieval Norse Studies**

# **Blood of my Blood**

*Incest, Parricide and Family Strifes in Ynglinga saga*

**Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Viking and Medieval Norse Studies**

**Jules Piet**  
**Kt.: 021293-3939**

**Leiðbeinandi: Ármann Jakobsson**  
**Maí 2016**

## **Acknowledgements**

This master thesis would not have been possible to write without the help of many people. I would like to thank my parents for their support, all the teachers of the Viking and medieval Norse studies program Haraldur Bernharðsson, Torfi Tulinius and Viðar Pálsson and to my supervisor, Ármann Jakobsonn for his precious advice, guidance and his always immediate and helpful responses to my questions.

Many thanks to Unaiza Ahmed for all the attention she has put in proof reading this thesis, to Jonathan Correa, Matthew Kenyon, Shirley McPhaul and Etienne Ménetrey for the many interesting thoughts they suggested to me through inspiring discussions, to all my friends back home and in Iceland who have shown interest and curiosity towards my thesis and finally to Inès Benhsaïne for her ever blindly confident encouraging comments.

## Abstract

Family transgression is a wide spread motive of Old Icelandic literature and many sagas have their own occurrence of internal familial strifes, however this thematic is rarely so central as it is in *Ynglinga saga*. Its author gave extensive attention to the question of familial transgression and hence to the notion of kinship in a more general way. This thesis aims to study the occurrences of familial transgression in *Ynglinga saga* in order to bring understanding to the medieval notion of kinship. The essay mainly focuses on *Ynglinga saga* but intends to open the discussion to other texts, inside and outside the medieval Icelandic context. A particular attention is given to the field of structuralism which is used alongside comparative studies to analyze the patterns in the resolution of familial transgression between the different texts studied.

## Útdráttur

Fjölskylduglæpir eru útbreiddir í forníslenskum bókmenntum og má finna mörg dæmi um fjölskyldudeilur í hinum ýmsu sögum og ritum. Þetta er þó sjaldan jafn áberandi og í *Ynglinga sögu* þar sem höfundurinn leggur mikla áherslu á hefndir og glæpi innan ramma fjölskyldunnar og vekur þannig upp spurningar um frændsemi og þýðingu hennar almennt. Í þessari ritgerð verður leitast við að rannsaka fjölskyldudeilur í *Ynglinga sögu* til að auka skilning á merkingu hugtaksins frændsemi í fornbókmenntum. Áherslan er aðallega á *Ynglinga sögu* en leitast verður við að tengja umræðuna við aðra texta, hvort heldur innan forníslenskra bókmennta sem utan. Sérstök áhersla er lögð á rannsóknaraðferðir formgerðarstefnunnar sem ásamt samanburði er nýtt til að greina munstur í hvernig brugðist er við fjölskylduglæpum í þeim textum sem athugaðir voru.

*“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s foes will be those of his own household”*

Matthew 10:35-36

## Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1. <i>Research question</i> .....	1
1.2. <i>Theory and method</i> .....	2
<b>2. Medieval Scandinavian kinship, legal and cultural conceptions</b> .....	9
2.1. <i>Real and fictional ethic</i> .....	9
2.2. <i>Icelandic laws, the Grágás</i> .....	10
2.3. <i>The eye of anthropology</i> .....	12
2.3.1. <i>Lévi-Strauss' structure of kinship</i> .....	12
2.3.2. <i>The origin of repulsion: natural vs social</i> .....	13
<b>3. Ynglinga saga as a corpus of familial transgression</b> .....	16
3.1. <i>Myth of primordial incest and its interdiction</i> .....	16
3.1.1. <i>The world of Ynglinga saga</i> .....	16
3.1.2. <i>War and peace: reunion of the Æsir and Vanir</i> .....	17
3.1.3. <i>Luces Urbis: Comparison with the rape of the Sabine women</i> .....	18
3.1.4. <i>One far all, and all for one: A theoretical solution</i> .....	20
3.2. <i>In the beginning was incest: Kinship and procreation in the Scandinavian Genesis</i> .....	21
3.2.1. <i>Gylfi's helping</i> .....	21
3.2.2. <i>Endogamous gods and exogamous giants</i> .....	24
3.2.3. <i>Rules as tools</i> .....	25
3.3. <i>Four weddings and four funerals: Vengeful wives</i> .....	26
3.3.1. <i>Cursed family: Ynglinga saga</i> .....	26
3.3.2. <i>The rapes of wrath: Abducted women and husband slaying</i> .....	27
3.4. <i>Fates of self-destructive families</i> .....	33
3.4.1. <i>Ynglinga saga's examples</i> .....	33
3.4.2. <i>Ok þú líka, Höðr?: Fratricide and kin slaying</i> .....	33
3.4.3. <i>Brothers in arms: Fraternal fidelity</i> .....	36
3.5. <i>Chance and necessity: Incest among humans</i> .....	37
3.5.1. <i>Chance: Ynglinga saga</i> .....	37
3.5.2. <i>Necessity: Völsunga saga</i> .....	38
3.5.3. <i>Helgi tyrannous: The tragic of incest</i> .....	40
<b>4. Conclusion: Medieval consequentialism, family transgressions and the ethic of the sagas</b> ..	42
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	44

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research question

“Þá sagði Hulð vólva þeim, at hon myndi svá síða ok þat með, at ættvíg skyldi ávallt vera í ætt þeira Ynglinga síðan. Þeir játtu því.”<sup>1</sup>

Two brothers agree to curse their own father and doom their family to “forever be the victim of kin slaying”. This sentence introduces one of the central thematics of *Ynglīga saga*, the opening text of *Heimskringla*, a compilation of sixteen sagas written in the thirteenth century whose stated goal is the retelling of the story of the Norwegian dynasty of the Ynglingar<sup>2</sup>. The author<sup>3</sup> makes clear that kin slaying is a consciously developed motive in this work. Furthermore, not only does *Ynglīga saga* denote a particular attention given to the thematic of parricide but also to a much wider catalogue of familial transgressions. The central place given to familial transgression in *Ynglīga saga* implies a reflection from the author towards the concept of family and kinship. Transgression, by definition can only exist in parallel with rules and taboos to be transgressed and thus kin slaying does not exist without a preexisting conception of kinship.

The aim of this essay is to study through *Ynglīga saga* the occurrences of familial transgressions in order to clarify the meaning of the rules governing the structures of kinship as they appear within medieval sources. In this aim the resources of structuralism will be used alongside the comparative method. *Ynglīga saga* will be both analyzed and used as a model to discuss familial transgressions within other mythological texts. In addition, *Snorra Edda* and *Völsunga saga*, two other texts from the thirteenth century, will be the two major Icelandic sources used along with two foreign sources, *The History of Rome* written in the first century B.C. by Livy and, to a lesser extent, the *Oresteia* written in the fifth century B.C. by Aeschylus. The reasons and the implications of the use of these texts will be discussed in the following part concerning theory and method.

---

<sup>1</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, vol. 1, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), 31.

<sup>2</sup> The time period covered by the compilation goes from Scandinavian antiquity to the first half of the thirteenth century when it was written. As the first text of the compilation *Ynglīga saga* covers the oldest time period discussed and its first characters are the euhemeristic version of the pagan deities of Scandinavia. The saga ends just before the reign of Hálfðan the black in the ninth century, and which is recounted in the following saga of the compilation.

<sup>3</sup> For convenience reasons and because it is not directly linked to the problematic of this work I will ignore as much as possible the debate concerning the authorship of *Heimskringla*. Of course the hypothesis of Snorri Sturluson as the author is not rejected but this essay does not require any certitude toward this question.

## 1.2. Theory and method

Family and kinship are two of the major concerns of anthropology. One cannot fully understand the mechanics of a society without studying its most basic social structure, the family. Family organization is subject to rules and taboos, if these rules, when applied to human societies are as much based on cultural as on biological concerns, what about fictional societies such as the Æsir or any royal/heroic dynasty of the “epic time”? The laws of these fictional groups are not bound to any physiological reality but rather follow their own internal logic. For example, the Vanir, before joining the Æsir, were strictly endogamous and practiced incest yet were a functioning society. Sinfjötli, in the cycle of the *Völsungar*, is the result of an incestuous union between Sigmundur and Signý but still is healthy, at least physically. For the writer, mythology and fiction can be an occasion to experiment with social schemes. What tools can be used in order to study social structures that are not bound to our reality but rather respect an internal logic having little to do with the biological necessity to produce healthy children?<sup>4</sup>

The field of anthropology and its principles were created to be used on human societies. However, structuralism is initially a production from within the field of linguistics, theorized by Saussure and has been applied by Lévi-Strauss to anthropology. Structuralism is as much a way to study human societies as to study relationship webs in wider terms. The analysis of fictional societies, in particular the ones belonging to the genre of myths, through a structural approach inherited partly from the anthropological works of Lévi-Strauss, has been proven enlightened by several scholars seeking for analysis rather than description, to paraphrase Clunies Ross in her preface to *Prolonged Echoes*<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, Scandinavian mythology and medieval literature cannot be considered as an object isolated from the rest of the world. Not only borrowings from foreign cultures but also the filiations between the different Indo-European mythologies, as shown by Dumézil and other comparative scholars, place Scandinavian and Icelandic literary production in a wider context worth considering in order to understand Scandinavian medieval material. The comparative approach used to study familial transgression is of two functions, first, in a quite classical way it can show patterns between

---

<sup>4</sup> The question of the origin of the taboo of incest in human societies is far from being simple. Its exact relation with any physiological necessity and reproduction purpose has been discussed between else by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. Needham Rodney, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard Von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon press, 1969). This problematic will be discussed further in the second part of this work.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, vol. 1, 2 vols., The Viking Collection 7 (Viborg: Odense University Press, 1994), 8.

different myths and hence tend to prove or disprove the hypothesis of the antiquity of these myths which would be inherited from common Indo-European myth ancestors. However, without even considering the possible genealogical relation between two myths the possible differences or similarities in the resolution of the same problem would be illuminating. The comparative method will be used in this work in the aim to show how the differences or similarities in the transgression and resolution of similar familial taboo are relevant in understanding the meaning and the origin of these taboos.

Furthermore, these myths, whether having an old Indo-European origin or not and whether being the product of borrowings from other literary contexts or not, are still for the modern scholar mostly apprehensible through the medium of Icelandic and Scandinavian literary production from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. If myths in contemporary scholarship are no longer considered simply as a “manual for rituals” and are known to have an evolution and life independent, even if linked somehow, to religious life they are still the product of a society and cannot be studied considered as an independent product from the culture which has produced them<sup>6</sup>. Hence references to medieval Icelandic normative texts in terms of familial ethic and taboos such as law codes, will be used as much as possible in this work in order to consider the relation between the social codes of myths and the ones belonging to the people writing them.

Myths in the Scandinavian contexts survived in their vast majority as recorded in post conversion time, none of them are the direct product of a pagan author aiming to share his belief. The main corpus of myths is found in *Snorra Edda* where mythological stories are displayed as a part of the learning of poetry. John McKinnell has discussed the possible reasons for why Christian people continue to read and record pagan myths<sup>7</sup> which he divided in four different categories, the performing of “practical magic”, the “learned comment and condemnation”, the “claims of divine lineage” (rather heroic in the mind of the Christian people claiming it), and the “training for professional poets”. I think the “claims for divine lineage” part is itself to be considered as one of the forms of a bigger category, the adaptation of myths to a new cosmology. When chieftains are claiming ascendancy from Óðinn they are not denying his existence nor are they denying all the mythological narrative, they are adapting it to the Christian conception of the world. As it will be discussed in this essay, *Ynglinga saga* is one example of the adaptations of mythology.

---

<sup>6</sup> This assumption is supported between else by Margaret Clunies Ross in *Prolonged Echoes* volume 1. I also share it and the argumentation of this work will have little to do with religion or religious ritual but rather will come to the study of law codes when an eye on the parallels between myths and social reality will be needed.

<sup>7</sup> John McKinnell, “Why Did Christians Continue to Find Pagan Myths Useful?,” in *Reflection on Old Norse Myths*, Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 33–50.

The narratives which will be studied here are both adapted myths discussed by Christian people as lies and myths discussed as historical truth after being adapted. The corpus of narrative studied will be mainly on one hand the story of the Æsir, Vanir and Giants which are the three main families of deities, Æsir and Vanir being perceived as beings worth worshipping while giants are more as a figure of opponents. And on the other hand, the story of the human heroes which some of them are as well mentioned in *Ynglinga saga*. Even if the corpus of texts concerning the problematic of transgression of familial taboos is wide this work does not aim to be an inventory of every single transgression in Scandinavian mythological and fictional context but rather to give a representative overview in order to construct a typology of familial transgressions and analyze them. In this aim the choice of *Ynglinga saga* as the main source discussed is particularly relevant for several reasons. First, as it has been discussed in the introduction the thematic of familial transgression is a conscious and central motive in the work. Secondly the aim and method of the author when writing *Heimskringla* confers to *Ynglinga saga* a particular value. The author has written a prologue to *Heimskringla* where he explains the aim of the work and his method to achieve it, here the compilation is clearly stated as an historical work, it is not intended to be a compilation of fictional narratives as is *Gylfaginning* for example. In this work the author aims for historical truth, when writing *Ynglinga saga* he has intended to report historical events, however because of his trust in the euhemeristic theory some of his sources are in fact mythological material.

Paul Veyne has discussed in *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes*<sup>8</sup> the views of Greek historians and philosophers of antiquity toward their own mythological folklore. Veyne intended to bring clarification on the concept of “euhemerism” which is used nowadays to define the reasoning of ancient Greek historians explaining the origin of myth and using them as historical sources. Veyne displays several examples of Greek philosophers and historians criticizing myths as they are recorded in poetry. Their main argument is that the myths are presenting obvious contradictions with the rules of nature which are known to be absolute and not relative to a geographic or temporal era. Veyne quotes Philostratus in *Heroicus* “It is said that the heroes were ten cubits tall. This is a charming but misleading and unbelievable myth, if one looks at nature, in which today’s individuals are the standard.” (Veyne 1988, 71) From this assessment Greek historians built a method to criticize mythology in order to separate the hypothetical truth contained in the myth from the reference to supernatural events or characters which were believed to be whimsical additions by poets to actual historical events. This method

---

<sup>8</sup> English translation: Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

of separation between “reality” and fiction is illustrated by this quote of Pausanias reported by Veyne concerning the myth of a musician who became king and eventually had been transformed into a swan by Apollo: “I am ready to believe that a musician became king of the Ligyes, but I cannot believe that a bird grew out a man.” (Ibid, 71) This kind of reasoning is not only to be found in antique and medieval historical thoughts, Spinoza, in modern times and for theological and philosophical purposes, has developed a similar one concerning miracles in chapter six of his *Theologico-political Treatise*. He argues there for the absoluteness of nature rules which cannot possibly be contradicted by miracles, he concludes that tales of miracles were invented by different people to emphasize the almightiness of their god(s) to show his superiority over the god(s) of the neighbors.

Based on this method Greek historians who had a historicist approach of mythology rationalized their myths. They turned heroes into kings, divine paternity into disguised shameful ascendance and so on. The author in the first chapters of *Ynglinga saga* is applying a similar method of rationalization to the Scandinavian mythological material<sup>9</sup>. Very much like Livy saying that “Lupa”, Latin for she-wolf, was actually a popular word for “prostitute” rationalized the story of the rescue of the twins Remus and Romulus by turning the wolf into a prostitute<sup>10</sup> *Ynglinga saga*’s author uses etymology and word similarities to explain the origin of the gods “Æsir” by a migration from Asia. However, if his method is similar some differences with the Greek writers are to be noticed, first, the author of *Ynglinga saga* unlike Pausanias does not deconstruct the belief in the old gods, he is Christian and never believed in them, the inexistence of pagan gods (at least in their divine nature) is not a conclusion point but rather an *a priori*. Secondly, whether he does not reject all supernatural elements of mythology or he has a different definition of natural laws that we and the Greek historian have, for instance the magic abilities of Óðinn are not negated. This second point is maybe somewhat a consequence of the first one, *Ynglinga saga* is not a deconstructivist approach of the myths, Christianization did it before and the author is not systematically criticizing every occurrence of supernatural but is rather mainly looking to remove or change the details which are in contradiction with Christian cosmology and doctrine.

However, if *Ynglinga saga*’s author’s method differs on some point from the Greek’s one their general aim is the same. They are looking for historical truth, therefore not only is *Ynglinga saga* providing us mythological and epic material but the author is also believing it to

---

<sup>9</sup> This theory is also known to be used in *Snorra Edda* although in a different way.

<sup>10</sup> Livy, *Livy, Books I and II*, ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse, trans. B. O. Foster, vol. 1, 13 vols. (London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1919), 19.

be true and is looking for truth. Hence the modern scholar can expect him to be faithful to his sources and to not make up out of his own mind scenarist features for an aesthetic purpose, in the search for the pleasure of the audience or any literary purpose. This does not mean that the author in *Ynglinga saga* is a faithful folklorist gathering every mythological narrative he can, but rather the inverse, we can expect him to operate a selection according to the aim of his work and to be faithful concerning the sources he considers relevant to discuss the early history of Scandinavia. Therefore the mythical and historical material conveyed by *Ynglinga saga* is not only relevant to discuss the mythical thought of medieval Icelanders but also, because it is an adaptation and not an invention, in a certain measure to discuss the pre-Christian beliefs which are reflected there, as Margaret Clunies Ross called them, as “*Prolonged echoes*”.

This view of a text written for historical purposes but sharing characteristics with myths has been discussed in similar terms by Pernille Hermann concerning *Íslendingabók*<sup>11</sup>. *Íslendingabók* and *Ynglinga saga* share similarities in their natures and goals as they both aim to reconstruct the foundation history of a country. I believe the assessment of Pernille Hermann concerning *Íslendingabók* to be relevant to *Ynglinga saga* and like her I will not define in this work myths by considering their subject as narratives implying gods and heroes, but rather by considering their nature as meaningful fictional narratives<sup>12</sup> which a social group believes or has believed to be true. This conception of *Ynglinga saga* as a text influenced by both medieval Icelandic society and pre-Christian mentality gives it a particular place in the web of inter-relation between medieval Icelandic narrative texts. Because the author is trying to reconstruct history, using older sources such as skaldic poetry, and to build a coherent chronology of events

---

<sup>11</sup> Pernille Hermann, “Íslendingabók and History,” in *Reflection on Old Norse Myths*, Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> As Pernille Hermann has discussed it (Hermann 2007) the question of “fictional” remains problematic. The writing of history and of mythology can be rather linked than diametrically opposed. I will consider here that the main difference between myth and history for pre modern historians lies not only in the “success” of the medieval historian, whether or not he succeeds to reach historical truth, but also on his method to attain it. When modern historian (and modern scholars in general) based their reasoning on evidences and scientific method the author of *Ynglinga saga* and antique historians do not base research for truth only on proofs but also on coherent explanations. The example of the etymology of Æsir given by Snorri illustrate this way of reasoning. According to the popular tradition of the Trojan origin of the royal dynasties of Europe Snorri wants to explain that the so called gods are actually heroes from Troy, their name “Æsir” corroborates this hypothesis hence both the theories of the Asian geographical origin and of the Asian etymological origin are “confirmed”. A coherent explanation of a belief is found and hence both the explanation and the belief are considered proven true. This way of writing history is itself close to the construction of myths. Sverre Bagge in Sverre Bagge, *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson’s Heimskringla*, University of California Press (Oxford, 1991) has discussed the question of the methodology and conception of authorship by the author of *Ynglinga saga* (Bagge arguing that the author is Snorri Sturluson). He argues that the reworking by the author of his sources to harmonized divergent versions of events in order to build a coherent sequence of events shows a conception of historical truth similar to the modern one, however what the author of *Ynglinga saga* considers as proofs and evidences has nothing to do with modern historiography.

he is putting together narratives from different type of material, poems, sagas, eye-witness, oral tradition etc. *Ynglinga* saga is hence a text open on other medieval literary productions, the euhemeristic theory of the origin of Scandinavian gods is also explained in the prologue to *Snorra Edda*. Some of the mythological traditions he is using to build history are present in the poems of the *Poetic Edda*. *Ynglinga Saga* is also referring to events described in at least two other sagas, *Hrólfs saga kraka* and *Skjöldunga saga* which is conserved partially through a Latin translation. These connections with other narratives are an opportunity to open the discussion concerning transgression of familial taboos to other sources relevant of the same tradition.

As discussed before the comparison will not be based only on myths and narratives from the Scandinavian medieval context. How can the corpus of foreign texts relevant to this study be defined? Even though this work will use the comparative method that is not in the aim, as, for example, Dumézil did, to try to reconstruct an idea of a theoretical “Proto Indo-European mentality”, nor is it in the idea to retrace the complete genealogy of Scandinavian myth as the filiation between myths will not be the first concern of the study. As stated before the aim of the comparison in this case is mainly to discuss the influence of social structure (both fictional and real) on the treatment of the familial taboos. Questions regarding the link within the Indo-European context if they are not the main preoccupation here will still be discussed, especially in the chapter concerning the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*.

The comparative source used concerning Latin material will be the *History of Rome* by Livy. Familial transgression is also a strong motive in this text. Although it is never mentioned clearly as a conscious motive yet it presents material concerning fratricide and kinship slaying in several occurrences. Like *Ynglinga saga*'s author, Livy aims to write a historical work but is dealing in great part with mythological material. These similitudes both in the form and in the subject make the views of Livy on the Latin mythological material interesting in a similar way the view of *Ynglinga saga*'s author on the Scandinavian one is. Beside this similarity between the two works, both the history of the king of Rome and the Scandinavian mythological narrative have been placed by Dumézil in the wider context of Indo-European mythology<sup>13</sup>.

The *Oresteia* from Aeschylus from the Greek tradition will be used as well. Like within *Ynglinga saga* familial transgression is in this text a conscious motif and a thread in the narrative. Nonetheless, a major difference remains between *Ynglinga saga* and the *Oresteia*: the aim of the author. Aeschylus writes for artistic purposes whereas the author of *Ynglinga*

---

<sup>13</sup> Georges Dumézil, *Mythe et épopée, L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Bibliothèque des sciences humaines (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 290-292.

*saga*, as it has been discussed earlier, is looking for historical truth. Both these similarities and differences will be discussed when comparing the two works.

## 2. Medieval Scandinavian kinship, legal and cultural conceptions

### 2.1. *Real and fictional ethic*

Even though the main concern of this thesis is to study the transgression of familial taboos within fictional works it is necessary to have an understanding of the actual social code of the society producing these fictional works. It has been discussed in the introduction that the taboos from mythological societies and the ones belonging to existing cultures are not ruled by the same imperatives and hence tend to naturally be different from each other. However, even though these fictional societies can be ruled by conventions, mainly independent from the real world social structures, they are still a literary production made by human beings and meant to be presented to human beings. These people have their own views on ethics, and their perception of the fictional work is influenced, both concerning the creator and the audience, by their own moral background. For instance, concerning a narrative picturing a marriage between two cousins, a person for whom this kind of marriage represents a strong taboo will not have the same perception of the story than another person for whom it is a perfectly fine type of union.

Nevertheless, this perception is yet different whether the story is meant to be historical or fictional. The willing suspension of disbelief allows the reader of a fictional piece to admit for some time the existence of a world whose coherence does not answer to the same internal logic as his own. He can imagine and accept a world where dragons exists, he can as well imagine a world where morality is not exactly the same as his own as long as they are not in total contradiction. For instance a very pacifist and legalist mind can nowadays watch a Tarantino movie such as *Kill Bill*, enjoy it, feel sympathy for characters and even support their actions although the same person would perceive the same behaviors as a totally illegitimate and excessive use of violence if they were taking place in reality. However, as has been remarked, *Ynglinga saga* is not intended to be a fictional work but a historical one, the medieval audience when considering the Æsir and Vanir way of life as described in *Ynglinga saga* was picturing them as human beings from the past, not merely human inventions.

Nonetheless antique and medieval people were not ignorant of concepts sharing similarities with our modern “cultural relativism”, in the *Confessions* Saint Augustine argues against some people who were justifying their immoral actions such as murder or stealing by referring to the life of the prophets such as Moses or Abraham who did the same actions in their time. These actions hence, regarding their views, must not be seen as bad behavior because they

were performed by the most exemplar men. Augustine strongly opposed this view by arguing that the prophets were living in a different time with different necessities and therefore God was allowing them, and even sometimes ordering them, to behave differently to what was expected in present day<sup>14</sup>. Another Augustinian view is the legitimacy of monarchy and more generally of political power even outside Christianity. Pagan kings as their Christian homologues were ruling their countries by the will of God according to Augustine<sup>15</sup>. The different text studied here have different approaches of ethical concerns, where *Ynglinga saga* tend to shows the aspects of the historical objectivity (which does not means that the text is actually impartial) other texts such as *Lokasenna* from the *Poetic Edda* can render strong moralistic view through the speech of its characters. This chapter is intended to clarify what are the familial taboos of the Icelandic medieval society in order to later have a better comprehension of the origin of these same transgressions when they happen to occur in literature, whether or not they are presented as transgressions.

## 2.2. Icelandic laws, the Grágás

The Grágás, the written laws of medieval Iceland from the twelfth century<sup>16</sup>, mention the notion of kinship and its legislation in two main occasions regarding this topic. The betrothals section establishes what kind of marital unions are illicit regarding the familial affinity between two individuals. A fine is to be paid to acquire the right to marry a kin in the sixth or seventh degree of affinity, unions between cousins on the fifth or fourth degree is considered illegal and the sentence is lesser outlawry. Unions between cousins of third degree were considered as a “major incest with kin” and sentenced by full outlawry. Unions between relatives of the second degree or less (cousins or siblings) were considered as “major incest with affine” and were as well sentenced by full outlawry. Not only are the Grágás concerned with natural relations but they also recognize links of spiritual kinships which as well have

---

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, “The Confessions,” in *Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey, Great Books of the Western World 18 (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, 1952).

<sup>15</sup> The point is not to say that the author had these precise arguments in mind when he wrote *Ynglinga saga* but the particularly strong influence of Augustinian thought on antique and medieval theology is to be considered. Augustinian monasteries were also present in Iceland.

<sup>16</sup> The Grágás, literally “grey goose”, were law codes in use during the period of the Icelandic commonwealth. These texts as we know them through our sources form a heterogeneous corpus where some of the article of one manuscript can contradict the articles found in another one. It is unlikely that the Grágás had been a unified work during their period of utilisation. See further: Andrew Dennis, ed., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás I*, trans. Peter Foote and Richard Perkins, vol. 1, 2 vols., The University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 3 (Winnipeg: The Univeristy of Manibota Press, 1980).

implication regarding marital unions. One cannot marry a person who has sponsored his baptism, primesigning or confirmation, he can neither marry the one he has sponsored the baptism, primesigning or confirmation of. Following this logic one cannot either marry a person whose children he has sponsored the baptism of.<sup>17</sup>

The homicide section is also informative concerning the notion of kinship. A paragraph is dedicated to “the women on whose account a man has the right to kill”, here they are clearly defined: “There are six women a man has the right to kill for. One is a man’s wife, two a man’s daughter, three a man’s mother, four is his sister, five is the foster daughter a man has brought up, six is the foster-mother who brought a man up”<sup>18</sup> A man has the right to kill another man who had intercourse with one of these woman, whether she was willing to or not. It is to be pointed out that these two sections of the *Grágás* put some culturally built relations on the same level as blood kinship. Furthermore even the laws concerning incest regarding biological links do not always have to do with physiological necessities, the condemnation for incest concerns all betrothals or intercourses going to the seventh degree of affinity included. Sixth and seventh degrees of affinity were in fact legal under the payment of a tithe, however marriage within the fifth degrees remained illegal until 1217 (Dennis, Foote and Perkins 200, 54). Any risk of physiological kind is actually nonexistent in the case of a child conceived by parents in the fifth degree of affinity. An Icelandic study performed with the help of the website *Íslendigabók*, which represents a particularly large database concerning biological affinity between Icelanders, even shows that far from being harmful, incest within the third degree of affinity is biologically of good consequences<sup>19</sup>.

As far as I know we do not know what the actual knowledge of medieval Christian Icelanders toward the consequences of incest was, nor do we know what their views concerning the origin of this taboo were. It is difficult to say then whether or not a medieval Icelandic was perceiving incest, even in distant affinities, as harmful for the conception of children<sup>20</sup>. We can however assume that after the Christianization even if the first origin of the taboo was not religious it was then supported by the canon laws and the *Old Testament* views on the matter.

---

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás II*, The University of Manitoba Press, vol. 2, 2 vols., Icelandic Studies 5 (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, and Richard Perkins, trans., *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás I*, vol. 1, 2 vols., The University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 3 (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1980), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Agnar Helgason et al., “An Association Between the Kinship and Fertility of Human Couples,” *Science*, no. 319 (February 8, 2008), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/319/5864/813.full>.

<sup>20</sup> As Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed it out (Lévi-Strauss, 1969, 13) Except for an example from Gregory the great no justification of the taboo of incest on the basis of biological purpose is to be found in Europe before the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### 2.3. *The eye of anthropology*

#### 2.3.1. *Lévi-Strauss' structure of kinship*

Even though some element of comprehension to understand the purpose of the taboo of incest can be found in Icelandic or canon laws it would be misleading to look for its origin, even as found in the medieval Icelandic society, inside this society itself. Incest is a universal taboo, its sources are not to be found in the peculiarities of a society but rather in the more universal specificities of human beings. The whole work of Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, is devoted to the origin of the taboo of incest which he explains through a detailed analysis of the structures of kinship. The conclusion of this work is that the taboo of incest is really not biological nor cultural but rather in itself the origin and the *sine qua non* of every human social organizations. The taboo of incest, in Lévi-Strauss' views is not a social product but rather society is the product of the taboo of incest and its consequences. This theory is summarized in this phrase: "The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister or daughter to be given to others" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 481). The taboo of incest is fundamental for a society because exogamic marriage results in a social profit, in the union between two familial units. Lévi-Strauss quotes a conversation between an ethnographer and an Arapesh, a native people from New-Guinea. The ethnographer asks him if one can marry his own sister, the native answer that no, they give their sisters to other men and other men give them their sister. When the ethnographer insists to know what would happen in such case where a man would marry his sister the Arapesh says "What, you would like to marry your sister! Don't you want a brother in law? Don't you realize that if you marry another man's sister and another man marries your own sister, you will have at least two brothers-in-law, while if you marry your own sister you will have none? With whom will you hunt, with whom will you garden, whom will you go to visit?" (Ibid, 485).

The taboo of incest is perceived here by all the positive social aspects endogamous marriage deprives of. Furthermore this interdiction is only functioning if agreed by all the community as marriage is an exchange. If one biological family is willing to give a daughter in marriage to another family but the other families are practicing incestuous endogamous marriage the first family will not find an available partner as all of them would be taken by internal members of the other family or either destined to be eventually married to one. And even though we can imagine a biological family practicing incest while tolerating occasionally

exogamous marriage the risk would be to not find reciprocity in the exchange, a family would give a daughter to another one but would not receive one which is diminishing the very purpose of exogamous marriage which is social benefits. The strict interdiction of incest only guarantees an optimum functioning of the exchange of partners. Thus the taboo of incest has to be generalized to be effective and there are apparently no rational reasons for a family to refuse it as it leads to mutual social benefits. This theory is also supported by the fact that it is not rare that in traditional societies marriages with cross cousins are perceived as an ideal type of union when the marriage with parallel cousins is an incest, cross-cousins and parallel cousins have the same level of genetic affinity, however these marriage are different on a social point of view. The taboo of incest in this theory is the basis for the exchange of women and men between the biological families and hence the creation of groups and societies.

### 2.3.2. *The origin of repulsion: natural vs social*

Lévi-Strauss' theories were at least partially contradicted by the assumption of Edward Westermarck on the origin of incest, the principle is known as Westermarck's effect and is developed through several of his works which place the origin of the repulsion for incest in a biological mechanism making children develop sexual disgust toward the people they are growing up with<sup>21</sup>. However, the anthropologist Melford E. Spiro has been analyzing the points of Westermarck through two of his own examples and ultimately reversed Westermarck's conclusions<sup>22</sup>. Spiro is discussing the origin of the revulsion caused by incest in human mind, if the examples taken from Westermarck are of an anthropological nature the focus of Spiro's method is as much psychological as sociological. The first example is the case of the *simpua* marriage, a traditional form of marriage in Chinese society. The *simpua* marriage consists in the choice by the parents of a boy for a future bride who is adopted while still a child, either an orphan or a girl from a poor family. The two children grow up together to marry each other when adults. Westermarck had noticed that indeed these *simpua* marriages have often a higher rate of adultery and divorce and a lower rate of fertility, nevertheless Spiro pointed out that even though a higher proportion of these marriage were failing next to other kinds of unions yet it was only a minority of them and a lot of *simpua* marriage are in fact working well, which is hardly compatible with the argument of a mutual sexual repulsion between the two spouses. Furthermore, Spiro presents other reasons why these marriage could be unsuccessful, the fact

---

<sup>21</sup> Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage*. (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1903), 320–330.

<sup>22</sup> Melford E. Spiro, *Oedipus in the Trobriand* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 148-158.

that they are considered as a vulgar type of union which can be lived as a humiliation for the husband, the girl who has been treated as an inferior during the time of her education in her husband's family can as well grow resentment against her spouse and his family. These marriage also result in a social obligation to marry not considering the feeling of the two spouses toward each other which is a factor to take into account as well.

The second example is the case of the Israeli kibbutzim children, as for the *simpua* marriage it seems to confirm the hypothesis of Westermarck, children growing up in the kibbutzim were raised together in a mixed environment, boys and girls were taking showers together, sleeping together in the same dormitory and adults were indulgent concerning their sexual plays. These children once grown up were never marrying each other despite the fact such unions were not at all forbidden. Indeed at a first sight it seems to fit well with the Westermarck's theory of the natural repulsion built during childhood. However Spiro as for the *simpua* marriage finds other reasons to explain the apparent lack of sexual or sentimental attraction between the kibbutz's children. The explanation lies not in the childhood period but in the following times during puberty. Teenagers in the kibbutzim were still living in a mixed environment, two girls and two boys were sharing the same bedroom and while the mixed education and the proximity between boys and girls were still the norm, the tolerance for sexual plays had turned to a strict prohibition of sexual life which was considered as interfering with the process of education during the teenage years. Boys and girls were meant to repress their own sexual feelings while they were still in close contact to each other. This frustration and internal struggle was so strong that some of the kibbutzim teenagers needed the help of psychiatrist. Furthermore, Spiro also reports the study of a psychiatrist, Kaffman, who relativizes the presumptions of total inexistence of relationships between people raised in the same kibbutz. If no marriage were reported yet most of the kibbutzim had their cases of relations between teenagers, which were indeed not typical but neither inexistent nor even rare. Moreover, after a change in the politics of the kibbutzim concerning the prohibition of sexual lives between teenagers, which were now at least unofficially tolerated, while the bedroom became unisexual rather than mixed, the percentage of teenagers in favor of sexual relationships between members of a same kibbutz went to 66 percent from 7 percent before the "reformation". Spiro points out that the rate of marriages between kibbutzim's children which remains low even after these changes can be explained by the smallness of the kibbutzim's community, it is indeed likely that regarding the small panel of choice within a kibbutz a member will choose a partner among the "outsiders" when exposed to the exterior world. These two examples show that not only the statement saying that sexual repulsion appears between

individuals growing up together during childhood but also that these individuals can feel sexually attracted to each other when these feelings are not socially repressed, the kibbutz' example being a particularly strong argument for the hypothesis of the cultural acquisition of sexual disgust in that the opposition to such union appeared to have drastically changed after a modification in the education.

Both Lévi-Strauss and Spiro tend to show the taboo of incest as a cultural rather than natural phenomenon, Lévi-Strauss by arguing its genealogical origins in the social advantage it brings, and Spiro by showing the cultural construction of the repulsion toward incestuous relationships and feelings. Furthermore, the *Grágás* by expanding the taboo of incest to a non-biologically threatening degree of consanguinity and considering the existence of culturally built relationships such as spiritual kinships are showed to be concerned in relations extending far over the biological sphere. This statement: the interdiction of incest being the basis of a well-functioning human society (if not the prerequisite for the existence of a human society) and the feeling of repulsion being culturally built, is also touching the problem of fictional societies, because the purpose of the taboo of incest is not primarily to secure the production of healthy children but rather is the central rule of any social organization it is not only applicable to natural societies but also to fictional ones which are depicted with a certain level of realism and reflection toward social organization. Hence the question concerning fictional societies is less about where these taboos come from if not from biological necessities and more about whether the taboo of incest within fictional societies merely mirrors our own society or rather is the product of an internal coherence leading to a similar interdiction and what the meaning of this transgression could be in a fictional work.

### 3. *Ynglinga saga* as a corpus of familial transgression

#### 3.1. *Myth of primordial incest and its interdiction*

##### 3.1.1. *The world of Ynglinga saga*

Chapters one to four of *Ynglinga saga* relate the history of the world before the Æsir settled in Scandinavia. It constitutes the story of the foundation of the society of the gods. The author there is not dealing with the origin of the world, as it has been discussed earlier he does not discuss matters that show direct contradiction with Christian cosmology and dogma, the cosmogony of Scandinavian mythology is obviously not compatible with the biblical one, and the author, because he has nothing to add to the Christian version and because his main focus is the history of Scandinavia is rather contextualizing his matter geographically with a brief description of the world in chapter one which begins by the words “Kringla heimsins<sup>23</sup>” which will give its modern title to the entirety of his history of the history of the Norwegian kings “*Heimskringla*”, “the Globe’s round face”.

Chapter two is focusing on the introduction of the main figure of the first part of *Ynglinga saga*, Óðinn<sup>24</sup>. As it is the case in the *prose Edda* the origin of the Æsir is placed in Asia, it is specified in chapter five that he had great possessions close to the land of the Turks “Fyrir sunnan fjallit er eigi langt til Tyrklands. Þar átti Óðinn eignir stórar.” (Bjarni 1941, 14) However when the *Edda* following the classical scheme initiated by Virgil in the *Aeneid*, is situating the period of the migration of the gods during the epic time of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* coming from the city of Troy, *Ynglinga saga* is placing the Æsir migration during the time of the expansion of the Roman Empire in Greece and Asia minor. The local kings are running away from roman invasion. However apart from the different chronological period this version of Óðinn is roughly the same as in the *Edda*, he is a powerful and ever victorious king submitting every kingdom he wants to his will “Óðinn var hermaðr mikill ok mjök víðföllum ok eignaðisk mörg ríki.” (Ibid, 11) From this chain of success supposedly comes the belief that he was presiding to victory and that his blessing or even the invocation of his name was to bring help to oneself: “Þá kǫlluðu þeir á nafn hans, ok þótti jafnan fá af því fró. Þar þóttusk þeir eiga allt traust, er hann var.” (Ibid, 11)

---

<sup>23</sup> Snorri Sturluson, “Ynglinga Saga,” in *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, vol. 1, Íslensk fornrit 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941), 9.

<sup>24</sup> For more reflections concerning the figure of Óðinn in *Ynglinga saga* see further John Lindow, “Myth Read as History: Odin in Snorri Sturluson’s Ynglinga Saga,” in *Myth a New Symposium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

### 3.1.2. War and peace: reunion of the Æsir and Vanir

After this short introduction of the character the narrative is unclenched in chapter four. The Æsir under the rule of Óðinn go to war against the Vanir. No reason for this conflict is given. However, even though Óðinn was previously always successful in military matters he is now in a difficult position against the Vanir, as no party succeed in overcoming his adversary, this situation leads the two parts to meet together for a truce. Hostages will be exchanged between Æsir and Vanir: “Herjuðu hvárir land annarra ok gerðu skaða. En er þat leiddisk hvárumtveggjum, lögðu þeir milli sín sættarstefnu ok gerðu frið ok seldusk gíslar.” (Ibid, 12) resulting from the *status quo* this truce should have been even for the two parts, however the balance of the benefits actually leans toward the Æsir side. The Æsir gave two of their men, Hœnir and Mímir, and in exchange the Vanir gave three of theirs, Njörð, Frey and Kvasir, furthermore not only have the Vanir accepted an uneven exchange but after feeling fooled by the Æsir because of Hœnir’s ineptitude they beheaded Mímir and sent his head to the Æsir who ultimately turned it into a benefic magical artefact. Hence the uneven balance of three against two become four against one (and even four against zero if we consider that indeed Hœnir is useless without Mímir). Moreover, not only the exchange is clearly in favor of the Æsir but the reunion of the two societies resulting from this peace is also leading to their benefit. It is stated that it was legal among the Vanir to marry between brothers and sisters: “Þá er Njörðr var með Vönum, þá hafði hann átta systur sína, því at þat váru þar lög” (ibid, 13), but by joining the Æsir the Vanir renounce to incest: “En þat var bannat með Ásum at byggva svá náit at frændsemi” (ibid, 13) They hence now have no choice but to join a system of wives exchange to find partners.

According to this system they would have to give Freyja, (who is introduced with her brother Freyr in the sentence preceding the interdiction of incest) who is notoriously one of (if not *the*) best match in god’s society. The Giants’ lust for her contrasted with the systematic refusal of the gods’ to give her is a common motor for the mythological narrative<sup>25</sup>. It is also to be noticed that if we replace this story not in the historical earthly version of *Ynglinga saga* but in its mythological context as depicted in *Völuspá* the Vanir and the Æsir are at this point the only two societies presented which usually take part in the exchange of wives, the giants are absent and are anyway generally more a pool for concubines than for wives. Hence if the Vanir refuse to practice exogamy the Æsir are consequently constrained to endogamy as well because

---

<sup>25</sup> See further: Margaret Clunies Ross, “Negative Reciprocity,” in *Prolonged Echoes*, vol. 1, 2 vols., The Viking Collection 7 (Viborg: Odense University Press, 1994).

of the inexistence of other partners. By forcing the Vanir into endogamy the Æsir solve their own problem of search for a partner while they guarantee for themselves the possession of the best possible match which is Freyja. In this perspective it can be understood through the spectrum of Lévi-Strauss view on kinship why Vanir were refusing exogamy. If as Lévi-Strauss stated, the taboo of incest is principally due to the systematic social advantage of exogamy, the Vanir have then no reason to follow this rule for in this specific case, created artificially by the medium of fiction, there is no social benefits for them to subscribe to exogamy, only the disadvantage of the loss of their precious Freyja. Because of all the social advantages earned, Óðinn and the Æsir, if not clearly victorious in the war are nevertheless clearly the winners of the peace.

### 3.1.3. *Luces Urbis: Comparison with the rape of the Sabine women*

Livy displays an almost identical scheme in his *History of Rome*, the story of the rape of the Sabine women<sup>26</sup>. He first describes the dramatic state of the city “but owing to the want of women a single generation was likely to see the end of her greatness, since she had neither prospect of posterity at home nor the right of intermarriage with her neighbours”<sup>27</sup> (Livy 1919, 33) The initial situation is similar to the one of the Æsir, the Roman people constitute an isolated group, they cannot marry inside, and in their case it is even physically impossible because of their own lack of women combined with the refusal of their neighbors to marry with them. Romulus went to ask the neighbors for the right to marry with them but unfortunately the answer is not the one expected: “Nowhere did the embassy obtain a friendly hearing” (Ibid, 35) Livy also gives the reason used by the neighbors to refuse the offer “And the envoys were frequently asked, on being dismissed, if they had opened a sanctuary for women as well as for men, for in that way only would they [the neighbors] obtain suitable wives” By the “sanctuary” the neighbors are referring to an enclosure, built by Romulus in the precedent chapter, which working as an asylum was meant to receive new people in order to develop the city. (Ibid, 35) This answer gives the reason why the Sabine did not want to marry with them, the Romans do not have women to give in exchange.

---

<sup>26</sup> The comparison between these two myths have already be done by Georges Dumézil, “Naissance D’un Peuple,” in *Mythe et épopée, L’idéologie Des Trois Fonctions Dans Les épopées Des Peuples Indo-Européens*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Bibliothèque Des Sciences Humaines 16 (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 288–295. However the following comparison that I will do between the two texts is not of the same nature, nevertheless I will refer to the statement of the Romans–Sabine conflict and of the Æsir–Vanir one as genealogically linked within the Indo-European heritage that Dumézil developed.

<sup>27</sup> All translation from Livy are B.O. Foster’s

As for the Æsir/Vanir confrontation the marriage is not possibly realizable because the conditions for reciprocity are not reunited and one of the parts would be inevitably involved in a loss-making exchange. Because the Romans do not have anything to offer the Sabine have no choice but to decline the offer however because the Roman have no other ways to find women they have no choice but to take the women anyway. The romans hence abduct the Sabine women and answering to the complaining of the Sabine men Romulus state simply that he was pushed by them to do it: “But Romulus himself went amongst them and explained that the pride of their parents had caused this deed, when they had refused their neighbours the right to intermarry” (Ibid, 37). Plutarch is even more explicit in his explanation of the same event “since they did not commit the rape out of wantonness, nor even with a desire to do mischief, but with the fixed purpose of uniting and blending the two peoples in the strongest bonds”<sup>28</sup> The social benefit is in his opinion the true purpose of this aggression, the will to build alliances, to seek for a brother-in-law.

These two myths are hence illustrations of Lévi-Strauss’ theory not within a human society but in a fictional one. The two myths depict a state of primordial incest/endogamy practiced willingly by a society and consequently constrained by another. From this endogamy results a disequilibrium perceived as an injustice by one of the part which leads to a conflict. However this injustice is not repaired by the conflict, it is merely inversed. After the peace making the Vanir appeared to be losing, they are deprived of their right to possess their women. The Sabine people are really not losing anything for it is assumed the Romans abducted only marriageable women, however they receive no women in exchange. Lévi-Strauss noted the scheme imply by wife exchange to be similar to the one conceived by Proudhon (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 90): “La propriété c’est le vol !”<sup>29</sup> – “Property is theft!” Proudhon conceived property only as negative reciprocity and negative reciprocity as theft. If this assumption applicable to the real world’s economy is open to discussion it is however there, in fictional works, depicted in the simplest possible form of the problem, which is the competition of two groups for only one good. The Vanir and the Sabine are depriving respectively the Æsir and the Romans from a good which is viewed as legitimate for them to possess, nevertheless they cannot actually solve the equation, rather than repair the injustice the uneven nature and oneness of the wanted good is forcing the former dispossessed part to become the new unjust owner through the forced

---

<sup>28</sup>The translation is Perrin Bernadotte’s from Plutarch, “Romulus,” in *Plutarch’s Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, vol. 11, 1 vols. (London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1914).

<sup>29</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, “Chapitre Premier,” in *Qu’est-Ce Que La Priorité ?*, (Paris: A. Lacroix et Co éditeurs, 1873), 13, <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k111212d/f2.item.r=le%20vol>.

exogamy imposed to the previously endogamous society. As Lévi-Strauss discussed, the origin of the taboo of incest is more an obligation to marry the mother and the sister to someone outside the family group than it is an interdiction to marry them within the family group.

#### 3.1.4. *One far all, and all for one: A theoretical solution*

Here the comparative method appears to be of a great value, these two myths are presenting strong similitudes which I think are enough to envisage a possible connection through a common ancestor myth (Dumézil 1968, 290-292). In this perspective the aspect of the narrative which are underlying in the Vanir – Æsir opposition from the Scandinavian material can be better understood and confirmed through a comparison with the Latin narrative which in this case is way more descriptive, precise and above all, more limpid concerning the motivations of the characters.

It is also interesting to notice that at least one other solution could exist to remediate to the injustice imposed to the Æsir by the Vanir way of life, the common ownership of Freyja by the community, or in other terms: the practice of polyandry by Freyja. This would be not only the correction of the injustice for one group but for both Æsir and Vanir. This possibility of behavior is evocated under the form of an accusation by Loki in *Lokasenna* stanza 30:

“Þegi þú, Freyja!  
þik kann ek fullgerva,  
era þér vamma vant;  
ása ok álfa,  
er hér inni eru,  
hverr hefir þinn hór verit.”<sup>30</sup>

The lascivious sexual behavior is a well-known attribute of Freyja, in his next stanza Loki accuses her of having slept with her brother. In his famous verse as reported in *Íslendingabók* Hjalti Skeggjason accuses her during the Althing of such sexual immorality: “Vil ek eigi goð geyja; grey þykki mér Freyja.”<sup>31</sup> However this reputation does not have repercussion in the larger narrative of Scandinavian mythology where Freyja is known to have become Óðr’s girl, Óðr possibly being a doublet of Óðinn. And if in any case Freyja has been known by the

---

<sup>30</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, ed., “Lokasenna,” in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Íslenzk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014) 414.

<sup>31</sup> Jakob Benediktsson, ed., “Íslendingabók” in *Íslendingabók Landnamabók*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Íslenzk fornrit 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968), 15.

medieval audience to have been sleeping with all the gods this position has not yet been confirmed by any official situation. The words used by Loki are also ambiguous for the modern reader, it is unclear who is to be understood by *Álfir*, however, as he refers to these people as being inside and only *Æsir* and *Vanir* are present it is likely that *Álfir* is to be understood as the *Vanir*, furthermore the word “*Álfir*“ offers a way to alliterate both with *Æsir* (*ása* in the verse) and with “*vamma vant*” in the upper verse, it is hence a handy *heiti* for “*Vanir*” in this situation<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless it remains unclear whether Loki is referring to a behavior similar to serial monogamy or to polygamy, whether he accuses her to have slept with the *Vanir* when the two societies were still separated, a fact that is already known, or if he accuses her to have slept with *Vanir* after this reunion and the interdiction of incest.

### 3.2. *In the beginning was incest: Kinship and procreation in the Scandinavian Genesis*

#### 3.2.1. *Gylfi's helping*

*Ynglinga saga* as it has been seen displays a foundation-myth explaining the origin of the structure of gods', the place of the interdiction of endogamous marriage and hence the institution of the taboo of incest is central in this process. However if in this narrative the *Æsir* are pushing society to establish exogamy as a norm they were not foreigner to endogamous union before this episode nor were they always attempting to push social codes to exogamy as a norm. This part will be focusing on the genesis of the world in Scandinavian mythology and the place of incest in this primitive stage of cosmology. *Ynglinga saga* will be set apart for a moment to focus mainly on the mythological narrative of the two *Eddas*. The main thread of this work is still *Ynglinga saga*, but the historical *Æsir* of *Ynglinga saga* find their origins in the mythological *Æsir* of the *Edda*. Furthermore the conclusions concerning the structure of kinship in the *Edda* will be found useful in later part of this work.

Following the eddic poetic tradition of the traveler obtaining knowledge by questioning his host *Gylfaginning*<sup>33</sup>, the mystification of Gylfi, portrays a king, Gylfi, journeying to the land of the *Æsir* with the project to understand their science. He there meets three kings named High, Equally-high and Third, they are probably a disguise for Óðinn as they will themselves mention these three names when reciting the many names of Óðinn. He will engage with them a

---

<sup>32</sup> For more information on the meaning of *Álfar* see further Terry Gunnell, “How Elvish Were the *Álfar*?,” in *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007) 123. And Ármann Jakobsson, “Beware of the Elf!: A Note on the Evolving Meaning of the Word *Álfar*,” *Folklore*, no. 126 (2015): 215–223.

<sup>33</sup> All quotes of *Gylfaginning* are from: Snorri Sturluson, “*Gylfaginning*,” in *Edda, prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes, Oxford University Press, Viking society for northern research (London, 1988).

conversation on a question – answer basis. Gylfi’s questions are often ironically mocked as naïve and obvious by his interlocutors but are in fact legitimate cosmological interrogations which deserve answers and are used by the author to explain pre-Christian mythology to his audience. At some point after having explained the origin of Earth and nonliving things HJÞ<sup>34</sup> mention the apparition of the first humanoid being. “Ok þá er mœttisk hrímin ok blær hitans svá at bráðnaði ok draup, ok af þeim kvikudropum kviknaði með krapti þess er til sendi hitann, ok varð manns líkandi, ok var sá nefndr Ymir.” (Anthony Faulkes 1988, 10) Gylfi being a rational person then asks “Hvernig óxu ættir þaðan eða skapaðisk svá at fleiri menn urðu, eða trúir þú þann guð er nú sagðir þú frá?” (Ibid, 10) Here lays a problem widely spread among myths and more generally in human thought. It is described by Lévi-Strauss in *Le cru et le cuit*<sup>35</sup> through the myth of Œdipus but also by Eric Csapo through the myth of Cecrops and the first Athenians kings on the basis of Lévi-Strauss and Peradotto’s previous suggestion and analysis<sup>36</sup>. This speculation is the question on the passage from one primeval being to multitude, and the passage from a first hypothetical stage of self-reproduction to the era of sexual reproduction. The paradox between the belief that men have one common ancestor and the observation of the natural world where allogamy, sexual reproduction between two individuals, is the only motor of human generation. Gylfi from this questioning thinks about two possibilities and ask which one is the truth: whether peoples have indeed grown from Ymir or is he rather a god<sup>37</sup>. HJÞ answers that indeed Ymir was no god and generations had to grow from him rather than be created.

Ymir according to HJÞ had procreated by two means, he sweated and hence created a male and a female from under his left arm, the other offspring is the result of the mating of his two legs (Ibid, 10–11). The problem is solved both by a kind of mitosis, auto generation from his own body, and by autogamy, self-fecundation. None of them are strictly speaking incest however they are clearly on the endogamous side of the marriage spectrum as not only do they not involve a partner outside the group but not a partner at all. The line of beings descending from Ymir are the giants, however as not only giants populate the universe HJÞ continues his explanation of the origin of species; a cow called Auðhumla appeared, fed itself by licking the rime-stone which makes Búri appear. Búri begot a son, Bor, the way in which Borr has been

---

<sup>34</sup> For convenience purpose and because the three men are very much acting as only one interlocutor in this conversation I will by now refer to them by their Icelandic initials, HJÞ, even though they are never talking all together at the same time.

<sup>35</sup> See further: Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques, Le Cru et Le Cuit*, vol. 1, 4 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1964).

<sup>36</sup> Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology, Ancient Cultures 1* (Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2005), 237-244.

<sup>37</sup> I presume that by asking if Ymir is a god Gylfi asks if he had the power of creation, to make man *ex nihilo* without any kind of creation mechanic as the Christian god did, or the Æsir will do later in the narrative.

engendered is not specified. Borr and a Giantess, Bestla, becoming the actors of the first exogamic union, conceived the first three Æsir, namely Óðinn, Vílir and Vé<sup>38</sup>. The first known deed of these three brothers is to kill their ancestor Ymir, from his body they shape the world. If Ymir is indeed of their kin the degree of affinity remain unclear, Bestla is a giantess, at least of the second generation because the name of her father is mentioned. Neither *Gylfaginning* nor *Völuspá* give indication whether or not this murder has to be considered as a kin-slaying.

After the founding of Ásgarð Óðinn begot his first son, Ásaþórr, he conceived him with Jǫrð – the Earth, which is described to be “dóttir hans ok kona hans“(Ibid, 13). This information however does not match with the following mention of this name where Jǫrð is tell to be daughter of Night and Annar, as Lindow discussed it (Lindow 2001, 205–206) the author maintains a distinction between Jǫrðin and Jǫrð in order to differentiate two different deities. However it is to be noted that one of the versions of the story of Jǫrð imply incest with her father Óðinn. From this incest results the birth of Þórr, no moral judgement from the author nor from other characters seems to oppose to it. Margaret Clunies Ross pointed out in *Prolonged Echoes* volume one the first acceptance of the practice of endogamous or even incestuous relationships by the Æsir (Clunies Ross 1994, 58). Indeed the Vanir are not yet mentioned and the giantesses if not disdained by the male Æsir are yet not at all their exclusive object of lust and official unions between them tend to be rare.

---

<sup>38</sup> John Lindow in, *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 90. call Burí the first of the Æsir. However Burí is never called an Æsir anywhere in *Snorra Edda*, if the giants are for their part the product of Ymir alone and can ultimately trace their origin to only one being this is not the case of Óðinn, Vílir and Vé which can retrace their ascendancy from both Ymir (Through Bestla) and Burí. Hence the Æsir might be characterized by being descendants from both of the two primeval beings while the giants are descendants from only one. HJP call Æsir only the descendent of Frigg and Óðinn (Anthony Faulkes 1988, 13) however Óðinn is himself regularly referred as an Æsir. Maybe this appellation restricted to the descendants of Óðinn is to suit the belief of the author in the “Asian” etymology for the Æsir, the term “Æsir” could hence possibly appear only after the foundation of Troy aka Ásgarð and be applicable to the ones born in this city and their descendants. The mythic groups socially functioning on the basis of agnatic line as shown in Margaret Clunies Ross, “Concepts and Ideologies,” in *Prolonged Echoes*, Odense University press, vol. 1, 2 vols., The Viking Collection 7 (Viborg, 1994) there is hence, following this definition of the Æsir group, no major problem for an Áss to begot a child with a giantess, the produce of the union will be descendent of the two primordial beings but remains in the Æsir family where such ascendancy is a norm. On the other hand, if a giant begot a son with a female Áss the product would be a being sociologically belonging to the giant group but by ancestry being identical to what characterized the Æsir. Perhaps more than the simple fact the patrilineal line is privileged this is the conflict between culturally and biologically defined familial appurtenance and identity which characterized the unclear allegiance of Loki, and the monstrosity of his offspring. (As an example of myth not mirroring the state of society this superiority of male over female line in mythic world apparently does not find a parallel within medieval Icelandic society as William Miller shown it in, “The Bonds of Kinship,” in *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking, Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 139–171.)

### 3.2.2. *Endogamous gods and exogamous giants*

The main reason which apparently leads the giants to prefer endogamy over exogamy in their first social stage seems to be the simple lack of choices, the impossibility to do otherwise: The first being Ymir was born alone, we see here the most extreme case of endogamy, Ymir produced descendants out of himself and by making his two legs breed together. Ymir produced both males and females. From this point, if we ignore the physiological necessities which are anyway, as we have seen earlier, not of great importance in the narrative, the descendants of Ymir can reproduce together and be the sole ancestors of their society without any exterior help. However it is stated that these lines are the descendants of giants, not the other beings. After Ymir Búri and then Borr were born<sup>39</sup> Borr who apparently does not have the capacity to produce life alone reproduced with Bestla. Exogamy occurred because it was necessary to continue the line. Nonetheless Borr only produced three sons with her, the line of Búri remain characterized by its full masculinity, this results in the resumption of the necessity to practice exogamy to reproduce. Hence comes the next information concerning the affairs of Óðinn when the Earth is called his daughter and wife. Óðinn can only have begotten her with a giantess, because all the line of Búri is made of males he has to find a partner among the giants. From this union appears the first female descendant of Búri. This new feminine presence immediately leads to the first endogamous union between two Æsir. As soon as it is possible for an Áss to procreate without dealing with the giants he takes the occasion, exogamy was the norm because it was the only solution, the line of Búri was constrained by the context. As soon as he has produced a female, Óðinn prefers to marry his daughter rather than a giantess. This happens to be a rather good choice as it leads to the birth of Þórr, one of the most important of the Æsir. The Æsir do not seem to find any social advantage to marrying outside their group and hence exogamy is only a standing-by solution. On the other hand the giants appear to have no apparent preference between endogamy and exogamy, they have the possibility to reproduce by taking partners among other giants but the union of giant women with Æsir men does not seem to lead to a conflict although for their lack of women the Æsir cannot compensate the giants. The situation will appear to be diametrically reversed after the Æsir encounter the Vanir.

---

<sup>39</sup> Whether or not Borr was born from a sexual union the problem remains the same, merely the generation during which it take place change. However as its female ascendancy is not specified one can assume he was created by Búri himself, which would be a parallel to Ymir's procreation method.

### 3.2.3. Rules as tools

According to *Völuspá* stanzas 26 and 27 the encounter with the woman Gullveig is preceding the conflict between Æsir and Vanir:

<sup>26</sup> Þat man hon fólkvig  
fyrst í heimi,  
er Gullveig  
geirum studdi,  
ok í hqll Hárs  
hana brenndu;  
þrysva brenndu  
þrysva borna  
opt, ósjaldan,  
þó hon enn lifir.

<sup>27</sup> Heiði hana hétu  
hvars til húsa kom  
ok völu vélsþá,  
vitti hon ganda;  
seið hon hvars hon kunni,  
seið hon hugleikinn,  
æ var hon angan  
illrar brúðar.<sup>40</sup>

This encounter starts violently in the first stanza but the Æsir are unsuccessful to kill her, Gullveig is then described as charming them by magic, yet being “illrar brúðar” “an evil bride/woman”. Lindow (2001, 127) note that Freyja in *Ynglinga saga* is known to have bring seiðr to the Æsir, hence a connection could be made between Freyja and Gullveig, she would either be the same character or a character of similar function. I see the association between Gullveig and Freyja to fit the precedent argumentation concerning the war between Æsir and Vanir, the disequilibrium comes from the presence of a valuable woman among another group. After having solved the problem of their lack of women the Æsir find themselves seduced by a member of an outsider group and have to once again change the social rules to obtain it, in that extent the Æsir look like children forging and modifying the rule of the game not to offer an equitable chance of victory but precisely to serve their own interests. Hence the origin of the taboo of incest within the society of mythic beings is their lust for Freyja/Gullveig or more generally any feminine entity more interesting than their own. This means that these social rules are not in any way in the cosmological view to be considered as absolute transcendental laws, they are the moving product of social needs and are fashioned by the dominant group to serve their dominant position over the other groups, these rules are not even formulated they are just applied *de facto* and are alterable as desired. These rules being the product of necessities and needs are thus amendable whenever the necessities change.

---

<sup>40</sup> Hauksbók version: Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, ed., “Völuspá (H),” in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 311–312.

As we will see this kind of temporary suspension of interdiction regarding of the context and the requirements of the situation will be one of the main threads of the transgression of the taboo of incest within the legendary corpus. This kind of suspension exists in fact for several taboos, for example Jews and Muslims can, and have to, eat pork or whatever non halal or casher food whenever this is the only available alimentation. The suspension of these taboos is easily conceivable as it can occur in anyone's life and therefore is a plausible option. However, the suspension of the taboo of incest is not. No one can easily imagine a situation taking place in real life where this taboo would have to be temporally suspended, where the result would be more of good than bad consequences. This situation can merely be created artificially within fictional works.

### 3.3. *Four weddings and four funerals: Vengeful wives*

#### 3.3.1. *Cursed family: Ynglinga saga*

Coming back to *Ynglinga saga*, after an account of Óðinn's settlement to Sweden and the succession of power for several generation, chapter fourteen recounts the story of king Vísburr. Vísburr married a woman named Auða and gave her wedding gifts including a golden necklace. From this marriage Vísburr had two sons but he later left Auða for another woman with whom he begot his future heir, Dómaldi. Apparently deprived from any right to inherit, Vísburr's first two sons go to their father and asked him for the gold necklace which Vísburr refuses. From this refusal originate two maledictions, first the Vísburr's sons predict to their father that this necklace will be the death of the best of his kin. Secondly, the two brothers afterward consult the sorceress Hulð to know how they should kill their father. Hulð helps them and also curses the Ynglingar's kin by making the family forever subject to kin-slaying. Following this discussion the Vísburr's sons go to their father's house and burn him inside<sup>41</sup> (Bjarni 1941, 30–31). This chapter is the root in the narrative of all following family transgression.

The origin of these transgressions is obviously Hulð by cursing the line of the Ynglingar. However Hulð is not responsible alone, as we see the prediction of the Vísburr's sons will also play a role. Several generations live safe from kin-slaying, nonetheless the malediction of the

---

<sup>41</sup> This is one of the rare occurrence of parricide. William Ian Miller noted that this transgression appears no single time within the family sagas' corpus (Miller 1990, 160). For further reflection on father sons relationships see Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of the Icelanders," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, no. 104 (2005): 297–325.

necklace will ultimately occur in chapter nineteen as it follows: King Agni is the current Ynglingar ruler, he decides one summer to attack Finland. The king of Finland, Frosti, naturally goes to Agni and affronts him. Frosti loses and is killed in the battle. Agni ravishes Frosti's daughter Skjálfr and marries her and in return for this marriage she asks him to hold a funeral feast for her dead father. During the funeral banquet Agni passes out drunk, Skjálfr seizes the opportunity to avenge her father and hang Agni to a tree by binding a rope to his gold necklace (Ibid, 37–38). A similar structure of events occur once again later in the saga chapter forty-eight: King Guðrøðr is the current Ynglingar ruler, he once sent men to ask king Haraldr red beard for his daughter, Ása's hand. Haraldr refuses, Guðrøðr does not accept the refusal and goes to seize the girl. He marries her and begets a son with her. Later on while drunk the king is assassinated under Ása's instigation. (Ibid, 79-80)

### 3.3.2. *The rapes of wrath: Abducted women and husband slaying*

Here was introduced a widespread thematic among Scandinavian and Germanic societies, the struggle of a woman regarding her allegiance, in case of conflict between her father's side and her husband's. This choice that Skjálfr and Ása have to make is a dilemma, they have to avenge their father but the object of this vengeance is their own husband, they are hence stuck between dishonors and the murder of a kin by alliance. Nonetheless both Skjálfr and Ása have very good reasons to choose their father's side and thus kill their husband, they both have been abducted and forced to marry their father's slayer. Skjálfr and Ása's dilemma is nevertheless not always so easy in its other occurrences within Icelandic literature. Perhaps the best known example of a victim of this tragic choice is Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, character of the *Völsung's cycle*<sup>42</sup> she had to face this kind of situation in several occasions. Her first husband Sigurðr has been slayed by her own brothers under the instigation of her sister-in-law Brynhildr, later on her brothers are killed by her new husband Atli, Brynhildr's brother. Finally her daughter is killed by king Jǫrmunrekr to whom she was intended to be married. This thematic is also present in the first part of *Völsunga saga* when Signý is married to king Siggeirr who happens to become her father's killer and of most of her brothers. She later kills the sons she had with her husband and begot a child with her brother in order to use him to kill Siggeirr.

These four women, Signý, Guðrún, Skjálfr and Ása all turned to be the death of their own husband in a process of vengeance where they were taking the side of their natural kin

---

<sup>42</sup> I refer by this term to the *Völsunga saga*, the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the abstract of the story made by Snorri in his *Edda*.

over the side of their husband and in laws. However as we have seen it for Skjálfr and Ása all these women have good reasons to choose their natural kinsmen, their husband is always the killer of their brothers or father, furthermore none of them have been married willingly to their husbands, Vǫlsung the father of Signý does not consider the opinion of his daughter when marrying her to Siggeirr. Guðrún is forced to marry Atli by her mother Grímhildr who craves to give her daughter a socially advantageous marriage despite Guðrún's disagreement. Skjálfr and Ása are not even married upon their family's approval as they are merely ravished by foreign kings who marry them by force.

This narrative scheme depicting women being harmful for their own husband of is not proper to the legendary material and can as well be found in the *Íslendingasögur*, Hallgerðr Hǫskuldr's daughter in *Njáls saga* is as well married to her first husband against her will, her father does not ask for her agreement, she points out herself that it denotes a lack of consideration toward her person. This marriage is rather unhappy and will eventually result in the death of the husband who will be killed by Þjóstólfr, the violent and over protective foster father of Hallgerðr who has been asked by Hallgerðr to avenge a slap she received from her husband.<sup>43</sup>

All these women are stuck in a struggle of loyalty where they take the side of their natural kin, or provoke the death of their husband for a personal offense as it is the case of Hallgerðr. These examples could seem to show a general preference for natural kinsmen over in laws. However, this preference is not a general rule, in *Gísli saga* Gísli complains about the behavior of his sister to whom he reproaches to not take his side in the conflict opposing him to his brother in law.

“Gatat sól fastrar systir,  
sveigar, mín at eiga,  
gætin, Gjúka dóttur  
Goðrúnar hugtúnum;  
þás loð-Sága lægis  
lét sinn, af hug stinum  
svá rak snjallra bræðra  
sør-Freyja, ver deyjja.”<sup>44</sup>

He precisely complains about her to not behave as Guðrún Gjúkadóttir did. This reproach made to his sister is quite unfair, first Gísli is himself helped by the absolute fidelity

---

<sup>43</sup> Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed., *Brennu-Njáls saga*, Íslensk fornrit 5 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954), 33-35.

<sup>44</sup> Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson, eds., “Gísli Saga Súrssonar,” in *Vestfirðinga Sögur*, Íslensk fornrit 6 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943), 62.

of his wife Auðr which should tend to make him understand marital loyalty, secondly the situation is not the same at all for his sister than for Guðrún. Guðrún has been married against her will and her own husband has been the slayer of her brothers, she has no reason to feel loyalty for a husband with whom she has not approved a relation with and from whom death came to her family. Gísli's sister's marriage is devoid of such flaws, Gísli's sister is happy in her marriage and supports her husband for the same reasons Auðr supports Gísli.

Considering *Gísli saga's* example it does not seem that any clear preference for the natural kin over in-laws exists. The common point between these vengeful wives is rather their own reluctance to be married to a man from whom they predict many bad deeds. Their unions are not conformed to the quite idealistic form of agreement toward a marriage which is often stated in saga literature through a short dialogue of this kind: a suitor comes to a man to ask him for his daughter's hand, if the suitor seems to be a good match the father answers that he agrees with this union but will ask the opinion of his daughter. The daughter after being consulted usually gives her agreement but states that the final decision is up to her father. In this way both the dominance of the father over his daughter and the importance of the daughter's opinion are clearly stated. If indeed the daughter never has the choice to freely choose a husband it is still perceived as unwise and unfair to impose upon her a man she openly rejects.

In the previous examples not only have the men of these sagas given little consideration to their kinswomen's feelings but they have also underestimated their instinct and intelligence. Signý predicts to her father that her marriage will be the source of terrible consequences. Guðrún predicts that from Atli will come only cruelty toward her brothers. Both Signý and Guðrún have good reasons to foresee bad fate resulting from their marriage, they understand better than their kinsmen the psychology and the motivations of their suitors. Signý sees that Siggeirr is jealous of Sigmundur Vǫlsung's son and wants him dead, Guðrún can see what her mother Grímhildr has unheeded, Atli's greed for gold. Grímhildr is herself greedy for social and economic gain when she marries her daughter to Atli, she tells to Guðrún that by this marriage she will rule over Atli's wealth, however at no single moment does Grímhildr consider the possibility that Atli could himself have the same exact way of thinking and could as well be using Guðrún to gain power over gold. In that perspective Signý and Guðrún are at the same time Cassandras and Trojan horses, they will be harmful both for their husband and their family, they can foresee it but their relatives are rather eager to build strong alliances and amass wealth than to listen to them and see how risky their moves are.

The preceding chapter was concerning the origin of incest in mythological diegesis and the manipulation of marriage by the Æsir community in order to gain social benefits. Here this

vision is balanced, if the texts are not a call to give women freedom in the choice of their partner it is nonetheless a presentation of the bad consequences of totally ignoring their opinion. The kinsmen and suitors of Signý and Guðrún in their eagerness to gain prestige and wealth show no consideration for the bride nor any prudence in their relation with their future in-law, they think of marriage as a source of only benefit when it will in fact later turn to be the origin of their death. Hence even though the text of *Völsunga saga* displays a more positive image of king Völsung than of queen Grímhildr their respective behavior toward their kinswomen is in fact quite similar and so are the consequences.

Both the legendary corpus and the Icelandic sagas display these examples of *femmes fatales*, women becoming deadly characters for the one they should be the closest ally because no attention has been given to their feelings toward the game of alliances their kinsmen were playing. The fear to live in the same house than his own worst and most dangerous enemies is quite strong in societies where some housemates are actually constrained to live there. The laws of the *Grágás* for instance are particularly harsh for the reluctant slaves, a slave who killed his master or mistress is condemned to have both hands and feet cut off and to be left on the floor in this state until death (Denis, Foote and Perkins 1980, 170-171). Slaves as reluctant women are potentially the most dangerous enemies of a man for they can strike from inside, the wife is even potentially worse than the slave as while a master can always look at his slaves with suspicion a relation of trust is supposed to govern a wife-husband relationship, a wife and a husband share the same bed, the place where the two of them are the most vulnerable<sup>45</sup>.

Men's anguish to be treacherously harmed by their wife or concubine is a current and wide spread motive of mythology, the character of Clytemnestra in the Greek mythological narrative show similarities with Guðrún. As Guðrún Clytemnestra has been taken by force by her husband, Agamemnon. The marital union of these two characters is based on negative reciprocity. Furthermore Agamemnon overrides most of the bounds built by marriage. When the moment comes for him to go to Troy there is unfortunately no wind to travel by sea. Agamemnon has offended the goddess Artemis who thus asks him to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to bring back the wind. Agamemnon accepts the deal, fortunately for Iphigenia a doe is substitute to her at the last moment by Artemis. However quite unsurprisingly whether her daughter is dead or not Clytemnestra feels betrayed by her husband. She starts a love relation with Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus while Agamemnon is abroad at war. When

---

<sup>45</sup> See further Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, "Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in *Gísla Saga*," in *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature, New Approach to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Viborg: Odense University Press, 1986).

ten years later Agamemnon comes back from Troy Clytemnestra kills him and the concubine he brought back from war, Cassandra.<sup>46</sup>

Both Greek and Scandinavian material displays the idea of a marriage which is wrong from the beginning and where flaws are severed by the behavior of the husband who by excessively unfair acts toward his wife pushes her to look for vengeance and eventually kills him. However, the respective offenses of the husband in Greek and Scandinavian literature are not the same. Agamemnon is punished to have attempted to kill his daughter and to a lesser extent to have forsaken his wife for more than ten years only to come back from war with a Trojan concubine. Atli and Siggeirr for their part are turning themselves against their in-laws they are denaturing the very purpose of marriage which is as it has been discussed earlier to build social links and alliances. The precedent chapter was displaying examples of marital unions governed by negative reciprocity of one group toward another, however the narrator of these stories was rather taking the side of the dominant group, the one taking the female entity, whether it was the roman with the Sabine women or the Æsir imposing their conditions to the Vanir. In the case of Guðrún and Signý the general scheme is quite similar but the empathy of the narrator goes now not to the abductor but to the abducted. Neither Guðrún nor Signý are really ravished, however their kinsmen are tricked by suitors who let them believe they are looking for a fine type of union while they actually just plan to use these marriage at their own advantage and in order to destroy their new in laws, thus marriage is corrupted to become an example of negative reciprocity. A behavior which was formerly perceived as positive is now presented as a disingenuous, cruel and unlawful deed which deserves to be avenged. Indeed the victim here is not the opponent of the main characters but rather the main characters themselves. The main characters being the victims of cunning treachery have to take vengeance, however because of the instauration of marriage confines between the two opposing groups this vengeance has to take the form of familial transgression.

There is no such clear moral stance from the narrator of *Ynglinga saga*, if the main characters are the Ynglingar we could expect the narrator to take their side however the writer deals here more with fact than ethics. Nonetheless these facts are speaking for themselves, the two abducted women Skjálfr and Ása become the murderers of their husband. If no moral judgment is openly expressed the reader can himself establish a consequentialist ethic on the matter, because such behaviors are irremediably leading to bad consequences they are thus not to be imitated. One can wonder if the wives' transgression are partly justified in the eyes of the

---

<sup>46</sup> Aeschylus, "Agamemnon," in *Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, Eumenides, Fragments*, ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: Harvard university press, 1926).

narrator by the right to take vengeance and are hence lawful in a way. Torfi Tulinius in *La "matière du Nord": sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIe siècle* noted the sentence of Signý explaining her suicide “Hefi ek ok svá mikit til unnnit at fram kæmisk hefndin, at mér er með engum kosti líft”<sup>47</sup>, hence the acts of Signý regardless of the justifications she has are at least emotionally unbearable for Signý herself who rather chooses death after having satisfied her will for revenge. Guðrún’s behavior is questioned by the lucid observation of her son Hamðir “Lítt lofaðir þú Gunnar ok Högna, þá er þeir drápu Sigurð ok þú vart roðin í hans blóði, ok illrar váru þínar bræðra hefndir, er þú drapt sonu þína”<sup>48</sup> Hamðir points out that even though his mother is presently eager to take vengeance she has not been satisfied by the revenge her brothers have taken on her husband, nor have her brothers been honorably avenged when Guðrún killed her own sons. Indeed why Guðrún’s brothers would be satisfied to see their sister kill their nephews? As many other saga characters stuck in a circle of vengeance, Hamðir can see the flaws and dangers of the feud system, especially when it takes place between kinsmen or in laws.

By definition, vengeance of women toward their husband appears to have for origin the husband’s behavior who himself put his wife in a position where her loyalty has to go first to her natural family, nonetheless this loyalty for the natural kinsmen is not granted nor is it a natural component of the familial system as it appears within Icelandic literature. The sister of Gísli Súrsson proves that in a position where a woman has nothing to take revenge on concerning her husband’s behavior she can perfectly take the side of her husband, even when it means to be in conflict with her own brother. Hence the vengeance of the wife if it can indeed be perceived as a transgression is in fact chiefly the final stage of an already corrupted system of alliance, either because the two families were using the marriage not to actually forge relation but merely as an instrument of power, or because the wife has simply been seized forcibly as Ása or Skjálfr. Transgressive behaviors are described to lead to more transgressions and so on until the eventual destruction of the families involved in this kind of vicious circle.

---

<sup>47</sup> Torfi Tulinius, *La "Matière du Nord" Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIème siècle*, Presse de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Voix Germaniques (Paris, 1995), 128-129.

<sup>48</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Völsunga Saga,” in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 216.

### 3.4. *Fates of self-destructive families*

#### 3.4.1. *Ynglinga saga's examples*

After the curse of the gold necklace, Hulð's malediction eventually occurs. In chapter twenty Agni's two sons Alrekr and Eiríkr are introduced. One day as the two brothers were riding their horses, they did not come back. When their people went to look for them they found the two brothers dead, they apparently killed each other with their horses' bridles. These deaths are rather enigmatic and neither the text nor the quoted stanza from Þjóðólfr gives the audience any further explanation regarding the reason of such deed. Nonetheless another fratricide immediately follows this one in a more explicit description. In chapter twenty one Yngvi and Álfr the sons of Alrekr are the current Ynglingar kings, Yngvi is described as generally better than his brother "Var Yngvi hermaðr mikill ok allsigrsæll, fríðr ok íþróttamaðr inn mesti, sterkr ok inn snarpasti í orrostum, mildr af fé ok gleðimaðr mikill. Af slíku öllu varð hann frægr ok vinsæll. Álfr konungr, bróðir hans, sat at lönðum ok var ekki í hernaði. Hann var kallaðr Elfsi. Hann var maðr þöggull, ríklundaðr ok óþýðr." (Aðalbjarnason 1941, 40–41) The difference between the two brothers is striking, in short one is a well accomplished and happy man while the other is a lazy person with no social skills. Álfr has yet one thing Yngvi do not has, a wife. Bera, his wife is described as beautiful and lively, she seems closer in nature to Yngvi than to Álfr and indeed she will become a close friend of Yngvi. When Álfr once reproached her for spending too much time with him she answered that "sú kona væri sæl, er heldr skyldi eiga Yngva en Álfr" (Ibid, 41) of course this reflection made Álfr angry, especially for Bera was regularly bringing it up. One night as Bera and Yngvi were as usual talking together Álfr came and killed his brother. Yngvi nonetheless succeeded to kill him before dying. If the reason for the slaying of the two first brothers remains obscure, the motivation behind the mutual slaying of Yngvi and Álfr is transparent, Álfr is led by his jealousy toward his brother.

#### 3.4.2. *Ok þú líka, Høðr?: Fratricide and kin slaying*

Fratricide is a wide spread motive of Icelandic literature and as David Clark discussed it is closely linked to Ragnarøk<sup>49</sup> which indeed follows the slaying of Baldr by Høðr and Loki. Like for Yngvi and Álfr the murder of Baldr by Høðr concerns the slaying of a preeminent man by his less impressive brother, however the real motivation of Loki and the question of the

---

<sup>49</sup> David Clark, "Kin-Slaying in the Poetic Edda: The End of the World?," in *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* (Oxford: Oxford university press, 2012).

responsibility of Höðr remains unclear. Nonetheless this deed displays strong similarities with another famous murder from Scandinavian material where the circumstances and motivation of the slayer are in this case more than clear: the death of Sigurðr Fafnisbani.

Both Baldr and Sigurðr are renowned heroes described as the best of men, both are also apparently protected by oaths. Indeed warned by Baldr's gruesome dreams, the Æsir decided to make all things on Earth swear an oath stipulating that they should not harm Baldr. Sigurðr, for his part, is protected by an oath said together with Guðrún's brothers as they have made themselves sworn brothers. However despite these oath both Baldr and Sigurðr have enemies. Brynhildr wants Sigurðr dead and Loki wants the same for Baldr. Both of them will find flaws in the oaths and ultimately will succeed to kill their target. Loki tricks Frigg who reveals that the mistletoe was too young to swear an oath and hence is potentially still harmful for Baldr. Brynhildr for her part uses emotional blackmail on Gunnar and threatens him to not share his bed anymore if he does not kill Sigurðr. Gunnar asks his brother Högni for help, Högni strongly opposes this deed and sees there the influence of Brynhildr. Högni attempts to convince his brother to not kill Sigurðr and his arguments are quite interesting as they show a parallel in their form to the earlier quoted argumentation of the Arapesh explaining to the ethnographer why marrying his own sister would be absurd. The Arapesh was explaining how anti-productive it would be to marry his own sister as he could give her in marriage to another man and himself marry the sister of another man and hence gain potentially two brothers in law in whom he would find companions. Högni for his part answers to Gunnar: "Ekki samir okkr særin at rjúfa með ófriði. Er oss ok mikit traust at honum. Eru engir konungar oss jafnir, ef sjá inn hýnski konungr lifir, ok slíkan mág fám vér aldri, ok hygg at, hversu gott væri, ef vér ættim slíkan mág ok systurson, ok sé ek, hversu þetta stenz af. Þat hefir Brynhildr vakit, ok hennar ráð koma oss í mikla svívirðing ok skaða." (Guðni 1954, 188-189) Högni sees all the benefits of this union, he sees that Sigurðr and his son are for them the best allies and how absurd it would be to kill them. To destroy what marriage has built would have the same consequences that the ones the Arapesh was talking about, it deprives the Gjúkungar from their in-laws, it parts family and isolates individuals from each other. It is a socially self-destructive act as much as incest and strict endogamy are on a social perspective, a plain mistake.

Nonetheless despite Högni's lucidity Gunnar, pushed by his wife, remains determined to kill Sigurðr. It appears that similarly to the mistletoe neglected by the Æsir, the Gjúkungar have a younger brother, Guttorm, who is naïve and was too young when the oaths were sworn and can hence attack Sigurðr. After the murder of Sigurðr, Guðrún emphasizes as Högni before her the terrible self-destructive consequences of this deed "þá munu þér finna, at Sigurðr er eigi

á aðra hönd yðr, ok munu þér þá sjá, at Sigurðr var yður gæfa ok styrkr, ok ef hann ætti sér slíka sonu, þá mætti þér styrkjast við hans afkvæmi ok sína frændr.” (Ibid, 191) Like Högni Guðrún sees that this slaying is anti-productive, it is nothing else than killing an ally. The writer of *Völsunga saga* displays a set of lucid characters whose observations give a voice to the opinion of the narrator and show where lays his sympathy. Guðrún and Högni are the voice of common sense in *Völsunga saga* and highlight the flaws in the behaviors of their kinsmen<sup>50</sup>.

In these two stories the physical murderer is a manipulated vulnerable individual. Höðr is blind and does not know what he is doing, Guttorm is too young to understand his action and is drugged by his brothers. Both Höðr and Guttorm will die because of their actions, nevertheless the root of the responsibility of these killings is depicted in the narrative to respectively belong to Loki and Brynhildr which are both a kind of fifth column, Loki being linked to the giants and Brynhildr being the sister of Atli.

Unlike it was the case for exogamy as opposed to incest, the explanation of the origin of the taboo of fratricide is not explained in the mythological narrative through the transition from one kind of society where it was a norm to another type of society where the practice is forbidden. In an opposite manner, the taboo toward fratricide is presented as the original norm, it is denounced as a transgression when it occurs among the *Völsungar* and this crime is directly linked to Ragnarök both through Baldr’s death and in *Völuspá* stanza 44<sup>51</sup>. While the practice of exogamy was explained through an origin myth, no genealogical origin for the taboo of kin slaying is discussed, the mythological narrative rather displays the potentially destructive consequences of such behaviors.

David Clark discussed the behavior of the Guðrún’s sons who killed their half-brother Erpr and thus as the Guðrún’s brothers before them find out they have harmed themselves in this deed (Clark 2012, 71). The metaphor surrounding the slaying of Erpr by his brothers is particularly illustrative of the self-harmful character of kin slaying. While the Guðrún’s sons are on their way to avenge their sister they meet their brother<sup>52</sup> Erpr, when they ask him how he could help them Erpr answers “Slíkt sem hönd hendi eða fótr fæti.” (Guðni 1954, 217) The brothers do not understand the meaning of Erpr’s sentence and think he does not plan to help them at all and thus kill him. Later one brother stumbles but catches up with his hand, another stumbles as well but catches up by putting his foot forward. The brothers hence realize the

---

<sup>50</sup> For another example of such manipulation see further *Njáls saga* chapter 107 to 111 where Morðr faints friendship with the Njáll’s sons and push them to kill their own foster brother Höskuldr (Einar 1954, 274-280)

<sup>51</sup> Konungsbók version: Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason, ed., “Völuspá (K),” in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Íslenzk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag 2014), 302.

<sup>52</sup> According to *Völsunga saga* Erpr is their brother, he can nonetheless be their half-brother in other sources.

meaning of Erpr's sibylline sentence. When they finally meet their sister's killer one brother cuts off his arms, the other chops off his legs but nobody remains to decapitate the king who hence survives and eventually kills them.

Kinsmen and especially brothers are seen in this episode but also more generally in Icelandic context, as natural allies, Erpr's metaphor is comparing the familial entity with a human body, each member is part of an all and should help the others, kin's slaying become an act close to suicide or self-mutilation. Ultimately king Jǫrmunrekr's mutilated but surviving body mirrors the harm the Gjúkungar did in their own kin. This comparison of family with human body is quite similar to another metaphor commonly used by Icelandic authors to characterize kin slaying, the tree comparison. A tree is a common object used in kennings for men, the "tree of the battle" being for instance a warrior or by extension a man, this comparison has been found appropriate to talk about kin-slaying and the social isolation following such deeds. David Clark has noted the several occurrences of this comparison within the poem *Hamðismál* (Clark 2012, 72). It is found under a variety of different forms, Guðrún can compare herself to a tree alone in the forest or deprived of leaves, or to the trunk of a tree deprived of its twigs. She also in the stanza 19 of *Guðrúnarkviða I*<sup>53</sup> sees herself as a little leaf among the bay-willows. John Lindow discussed as well the possible poetic association between Baldr and a tree<sup>54</sup>.

### 3.4.3. *Brothers in arms: Fraternal fidelity*

On the other side fraternal fidelity is often described as a winning option. The starting point of *Hrólfs saga kraka* is a fratricide, Fróði and Hálfðan are two brothers ruling together over Denmark. Hálfðan is a good man and control the best part of the country, Fróði is for his part a jealous man ruling over a smaller portion of the kingdom. Fróði led by his jealousy kills his brother to take over the country. His two nephews Hróarr and Helgi Hálfðan's sons manage to escape from their murderous uncle. Later the two brothers, plan to avenge their father and to kill Fróði with the help of their foster father. When Fróði understands that he cannot escape from his vengeful nephews he tries to quite ironically defend his case by raising the argument of the unfairness of kin slaying: "ok ferr þetta óskapliga í millum vár frænda, at hvárr skal vilja

---

<sup>53</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson and Véstein Ólason, eds., "Guðrúnarkviða I," in *Eddukvæði*, vol. 1, 2 vols., Íslensk fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 332.

<sup>54</sup> John Lindow, *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1997), 43-44.

vera banamaðr annars.”<sup>55</sup> Of course this poor argumentation which is more a self-accusation than anything else is more comic than convincing and will not save the man. Fróði is thus burned in his hall by the two associated and victorious brothers.

The authors of fratricide in *Ynglinga saga* can hardly be said to have a better fate than the examples discussed above. Both case of brothers slayings are described to ultimately lead to the death of both brothers. One could also wonder if it is totally fortuitous that the author in the immediately following chapter feels needed to refer to Haki, a sea king taking over Sweden against the Ynglingar, as the member of a successful association of two brothers although the second brother never appears in the story (Guðni 1954, 43-44). Is it also meaningless if the Ynglingar kings who finally reconquer their country against Haki are two brothers in association? (Bjarni 1941, 44-45) The author of *Ynglinga saga* has a distant point of view toward the story he describes, he sees himself as a historian, a recorder of fact not a saga maker. He cannot pretend to know what happens in the mind of the character nor can he openly takes side in the conflict he describes. However as it is rather common as well in the sagas he can display a set of behaviors and their respective consequences. Like earlier with the taboo of incest among the Æsir the rule is not transcendental, it is merely a consequentialist observation of social life. Fratricide is described to often originate from the jealousy between brothers which itself comes from their unequal share in their heritage. The historical example of the Charlemagne’s sons illustrates how real these brothers’ rivalry could be and how far they could lead kinsmen into violence. However even when the jealous brother succeeds in overcoming his brother the consequence of his deed are most often to be his end, sooner or later. Contrasting these portraits of mutually destructive siblings, Icelandic literature displays examples of successful allied brothers. Both fratricide and war among in-laws are described as absurdities. The lucid characters trying to preserve peace raise very practical arguments, not abstract ethical views, they are trying to prevent the mutual and total destruction of their respective families.

### 3.5. *Chance and necessity: Incest among humans*

#### 3.5.1. *Chance: Ynglinga saga*

We have discussed earlier the mythic explanation of the origin of exogamy as a norm and hence the explanation in mythic thought of the interdiction of incest as a generalized rules, nonetheless if this rule is indeed supposed to be generalized it appears to be sometime

---

<sup>55</sup> Guðni Jónsson, ed., “Hrólfs saga kraka” in *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954), 13.

transgressed within literature in some special occasions. The chapter twenty-nine of *Ynglinga saga* relates one version of the story of queen Ólǫf and king Helgi. King Helgi went to loot Sweden, among his war gain he brings back Yrsa, daughter of the queen Ólǫf, and he makes her his wife and begets a son with her, Hrólfr kraki. Later queen Ólǫf comes to Yrsa and tells her her true ascendancy, she is Helgi's and Ólǫf's daughter, Yrsa has married and had a son with her own father. Because of this revelation Yrsa decides to leave her husband and go back to her mother (Ibid, 56-57)<sup>56</sup>. Another version of the same story is given with more details in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where the conception of Yrsa is explained in more details. (Guðni 1954, 19-20)

### 3.5.2. *Necessity: Vǫlsunga saga*

Georges Dumézil in *La saga de Hadingus, du mythe au roman*<sup>57</sup> discussed briefly some patterns between Scandinavian and Celtic mythology principally concerning the birth of heroes through incestuous relationships. Carolyne Larrington discussed these kind of heroes birth citing among them the well-known Mordred but also Rolant, the Roland of the Icelandic medieval compilation of the Charlemagne's epic, *Karlamagnús saga*<sup>58</sup>. Indeed in this Icelandic version of the story Rolant is the incestuous son of Charlemagne with his sister Gilem. If Charlemagne is sometime referred to be Roland's father in other text only the Icelandic version conserved explicitly the tradition of the incestuous origin of the hero.

If Yrsa and Helgi have the excuse to ignore their transgression this is not the case for every saga characters, as we have briefly discussed it earlier incest takes a part in the vengeance plan of Signý, she begot a son with her brother in order to avenge her father. The transgression of such a well-established rule can seem strange, the strong benefits of exogamy have been discussed earlier, however, as we have seen this interdiction was subject to necessities and context. The Æsir were fashioning the rules for their own profit and the existence of exogamy among the gods was merely the result of the construction of social structure beneficial for themselves. Signý is in a very peculiar situation where because of the current necessities she

---

<sup>56</sup> This decision if not dramatic as Sýgni's suicide is, however it is the spirit of the *Grágas* in which it is stipulated that in the case where an incestuous relation is discover only after marriage the two married ones should merely divorce and no justice action should be taken against them. The *Grágas* nonetheless does not accept such excuse for an incest of the first degree as it is the case here. (Dennis 2000, 77)

<sup>57</sup> Georges Dumézil, *La saga de Hadingus (Saxo Grammaticus I, V-V-VIII)*, Bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études, section des sciences religieuses 66 (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1953) 57.

<sup>58</sup> Carolyne Larrington, *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature* (Rochester: York Medieval Press, 2015), 165-166.

decides to change the rules. When she explains to her brother the origin of Sinfjötli's strength she says "Hefir hann af því mikit kapp, at hann er bæði sonarsonr ok dóttursonr Völsungs konungs" (Guðni 1954, 127) this suits the description of Sinfjötli given earlier in the saga "Ok er hann vex upp, er hann bæði mikill ok sterkr ok vænn at álitu ok mjök í ætt Völsunga" (Ibid, 122) as Carolyne Larrington noted it the motivations of Signý are of a biological kind (Larrington 2015, 169). Signý noticed the transmission of some qualities through Völsung's line and by begetting a child with her own brother she is trying to improve the preexistent Völsung's biological characteristics and transmit them all to her child. In other words, Signý is breeding human beings as humans breed animals in order to control the heredity of some genetic traits.

This way of thinking is to be put in the context of medieval aristocratic social system. The concept of aristocracy lies on the belief that some families are superior to others and that this superiority is hereditarily transmitted. Here Signý's transgression is not resulting from a social reasoning but rather from a biological one. In total contradiction with contemporary thought where modern societies often tend to explain the taboo of incest through its possible biological dangerousness the author of *Völsunga saga* explains the purpose of incest precisely through a biological reason. Even if the explanation is here of a biological nature perhaps such reluctance for aristocrats to marry below their social level can be explained as well through Lévi-Strauss' thought. If indeed as Lévi-Strauss explained it exogamy is the motor of social organization and that its purpose is social benefit a strong social inequality between the two brides would dismiss the social benefit of exogamy as one of the families would not find in the other one a valuable partner. The very principle of exogamy implies reciprocity in order to be a gainful union. If our modern societies tend to consolidate and explain the rule of exogamy by referring to biological necessities, could medieval societies have done the same and enforced the social rule by the belief in aristocrats' superiority? In short they would have merely thought their cultural laws to find their origins in natural realities, a rather common human misconception of their own social codes. Paul Veyne in *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien*<sup>59</sup> has discussed the concept of "true because useful" the mental process making a concept or a belief easier to believe in when it comes to be socially interesting to accept it. The same could be of the belief into hereditary aristocracy's superiority which would be a good explanation both of the social predominance of some people and of their preference to marry each other. The witting transgression of Signý could hence render the tensions between two

---

<sup>59</sup> Paul Veyne, *Quand Notre Monde Est Devenu Chrétien (312-394)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007).

social obligations which could in some cases contradict each other, first the obligation to marry outside the kin group, secondly the necessity to marry within a hierarchically similar social group. In the social context built by the author of *Völsunga saga* these two injunctions cannot be fulfilled together in the same time and Signý hence transgress one of them by begetting Sinfjötli with Sigmundur.

Elizabeth Archibald in *Incest and the medieval imagination* has discussed the question of Signý's suicide following her vengeance, she claims that this suicide is rather motivated by her treachery and her multiple infanticides than by her witting incest (Archibald 2001, 220). Torfi in *La matière du Nord* (Torfi 1995, 128) and Carolyne Larrington in *Brothers and sisters in medieval European literature* (Larrington 2015, 168) are for their part linking the suicide at least in part to incest. Elizabeth Archibald's argues that the text is not making reference to an incest taboo, however the text is not explicitly making reference either to the taboo of infidelity. Furthermore one could also wonder why Signý would have to change her appearance in order to sleep with her brother if a strong reluctance toward incest was not implied, Signý and Sigmundur kill without problem Signý's children for not being strong enough, if a strong disgust toward incest was not a reality Signý could have similarly to what she did with infanticide explained her plan to her brother rather than trick him. The final confession of Signý before her death is also to be understood as due to Signý's particularly hard internal mental struggle, the reader already knows the truth, the revelation is not there to inform him of anything new. On the other hand nothing is said about the reaction of Sigmundur and Sinfjötli, the purpose of the revelation in the narrative is hence not to inflect the behavior of other characters nor is it to build a dramatic situation based on Sigmundur's reaction. The only effect of this revelation is to bring light on Signý's mind, on her motivations and feelings, the enumeration of her crime is thus less to be seen as a revelation than as a self-accusation and the explanation for her suicide. I hence join Torfi and Carolyne Larrington on their interpretation of the suicide as at least partly directly linked to her incest. Following this interpretation Signý indeed has been stuck between inter contradictory social rules, she has made a choice but cannot bear the responsibility of her deeds once the vengeance is fulfilled and that the suspension of interdiction takes an end.

### 3.5.3. *Helgi tyrannous: The tragic of incest*

Icelandic literature through few examples of human incest is displaying a rather heterogenic corpus. Incest can occur between a man and his daughter as for Helgi and Yrsa or

between a brother and a sister like in the case of Sigmundur and Signý. It can be a pure accident like Helgi and Yrsa both ignoring their affiliation, as it can be the trick of one kin to another as for Signý and Sigmundur. Incest whether accidental or not, whether between brother and sister or between father and daughter can result in the birth of a hero, however beyond the potential high quality of the offspring the consequences of incest are often sordid, Signý kills herself, Yrsa leaves her husband-father who will then fall into depression and try to take her back, Karlamágnus has to confess his fault and felt ashamed after the revelation. This wide variety in the corpus suggest that medieval authors were using the medium of literature to rethink some social schemes and play a game of “what if?” “What if a father was sleeping with his daughter without knowing it?” “What if a woman had to sleep with her brother?” and so on. These chains of events can evoke Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus the king* where a succession of small and unlikely events leads the story to end in the worst possible situation<sup>60</sup>.

This speculative exploration of the taboo of incest result in questioning its meaning, its limits, its consequences and the responsibility of the transgressors. This research nonetheless is almost always going together with a strong condemnation of the practice. While the example of the *Æsir* was an explanation of the origin and purpose of the practice of exogamy the occurrence of incest featuring human beings is rather displaying the consequences of the transgression than explaining its origins. These consequences are always noxious, incest results in death, suicide, murder, shame and more generally unhappiness. If indeed the authors are questioning the purpose of incest their conclusion is nevertheless always rendering the strong taboo bound to this practice.

---

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Archibald emits, quite convincingly in my opinion, the hypothesis of a good knowledge of the Oedipus narrative from the English authors of incest stories in Arthurian world. (Archibald 2001, 208)

#### **4. Conclusion: Medieval consequentialism, family transgressions and the ethic of the sagas**

Through this essay we have been studying some of the occurrences of familial transgression within Icelandic medieval literature. Whether they were considering themselves as historians or writers of fictions the authors of the text studied have not merely been using familial transgression as a common literary motive, they have been questioning these taboos, and they have discussed their origins and the respective social consequences of the respect and transgression of these taboos. These authors have not merely been writing moralistic stories in order to incite the audience to respect some rules, these authors have been producing coherent reflections toward the social mechanism of their societies. It would be simplistic to see *Ynglinga saga* or any of the texts studied here merely as moral tales, their purpose is not moralistic, nonetheless if morality is not the core of these writings they are still displaying some ethic views.

The moral, of *Ynglinga saga* and of Icelandic sagas, if there is any, is most often not a transcendent one. These texts are displaying a consequentialist perception of ethic, familial transgressions are not perceived as bad behavior because they are transcendentally bad or because they have been forbidden by a divinity, familial transgressions are to be avoided because they are noxious, and furthermore, not only are they noxious for the community but they are directly harmful for the transgressor himself. To kill his brother is an absurdity and an aberration because it deprives the killer himself from his natural ally, to marry a woman by force is to be avoided because it leads to treachery, disloyalty and eventually to death.

Sometimes some lucid characters can see how risky is the bet that their kinsmen are facing by believing they will eventually thrive from transgression or manipulation of the rules. These lucid characters are pointing out the inevitable bad consequences of such deeds, these consequences are either the destruction of the natural family bond or the destruction of the cultural bond resulting from the alliance of families through marriage. Lévi-Strauss in the conclusion of *The elementary structures of kinship* was claiming the taboo of incest to be at the origin of every social organization, to be the motor of social union and to be at the origin of every other rule (Lévi-Strauss 1969, 479) this assertion whether true or not is at least corroborated by the reflection of Icelandic writers toward social life, the main danger of familial transgression is to destruct the social bond built by exogamous marriage. When Högni exposes to Gunnar the absurdity that would be Sigurðr's slaying he does not refer to any intrinsic moral

law bound to this deed, he explains how bad would be the consequences, the destruction of the strong alliance forged by an exogamous marriage. If King Agni is eventually hanged on a tree by his wife it is because he has failed to build an alliance through marriage, quite the inverse he has only created enmities. Familial transgression as described by Icelandic authors are either the deeds which results in the destruction or the corruption of exogamous marriage and its purpose, or even more absurd the deeds resulting in the destruction of the natural atomic family. However even the deeds being harmful principally for the natural family, can somehow be linked to the idea of corrupt marriage, Erpr is killed by his brothers when they are going to avenge their sister killed by her own bride, if Yngvi is killed by his brother Alf it is because of his ambiguous relation with Alf's wife.

Because these literary works are discussing transgressions and explaining them through their consequences, because this ethic does not deal with absoluteness, categorical imperative or the transcendence of religion and because the underlying moral of *Ynglinga saga* and more generally of medieval Icelandic literature is rarely "You shall not" but rather "You should not" is maybe one of the elements of a response to the interrogation mentioned earlier and formulate by John McKinell: "*Why did Christians continue to find pagan myth useful?*", the place for a moral god was left vacant by the pagan mythological narrative, no sacred moral existed within mythology to contradict the Christian canon. Pagan myths merely left to the Christian Scandinavian people stories analyzing social life rather than attempting to give it a meaning.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

- Aeschylus. "Agamemnon." In *Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, Eumenides, Fragments*, edited by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, translated by Herbert Weir Smyth, Vol. 2. London: Harvard University Press, 1926.
- Augustine. "The Confessions." In *Augustine*, translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey. Great Books of the Western World 18. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc, 1952.
- Björn K. Þórólfsson, and Guðni Jónsson, eds. "Gísla Saga Súrssonar." In *Vestfirðinga Sögur*. Íslenzk fornrit 6. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1943.
- Dennis, Andrew, ed. *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás I*. Translated by Peter Foote and Richard Perkins. Vol. 1. 2 vols. The University of Manitoba Icelandic Studies 3. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba press, 1980.
- . , ed. *Laws of Early Iceland, Grágás II*. Translated by Peter Foote and Richard Perkins. Vol. 2. 2 vols. The University of Manitoba Press Icelandic Studies 5. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 2000.
- Einar Ól Sveinsson, ed. *Brennu-Njáls Saga*. Íslenzk fornrit 5. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954.
- Guðni Jónsson, ed. "Hrólf's Saga Kraka." In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 1. Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954.
- . , ed. "Völsunga Saga." In *Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda*, Vol. 1. Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnaútgáfan, 1954.
- Jakob Benediktsson. "Íslendingabók." In *Íslendigabók Landnamabók*, Vol. 1. Íslenzk fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1968.
- Jónas Kristjánsson, and Véstein Ólason, eds. "Guðrúnarkvida I." In *Eddukvæði*, Vol. 1. Íslenzk fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014.
- . , eds. "Lokasenna." In *Eddukvæði*, Vol. 1. Íslenzk fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014.
- . , eds. "Völuspá (H)." In *Eddukvæði*, Vol. 1. Íslenzk fornrit. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014.
- Livy. *Livy, Books I and II*. Edited by T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse. Translated by B. O. Foster. Vol. 1. 13 vols. London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1919.
- Plutarch. *Plutarch's Lives*. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Vol. 11. 1 vols. London: The Loeb Classical Library, 1914.

Snorri Sturluson. "Gylfaginning." In *Edda*, translated by Anthony Faulkes. London: Everyman, 1987.

———. "Gylfaginning." In *Edda, prologue and Gylfaginning*, edited by Anthony Faulkes, 10–11. Viking society for northern research. London: Oxford University Press, 1988.

———. *Heimskringla*. Edited by Bjarni Aðalbjarnason. Vol. 1. Íslensk fornrit 26. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941.

## Secondary sources

Agnar Helgason, Snæbjorn Pálsson, Daníel F Guðbjartsson, Þórður Kristjánsson, and Kári Stefánsson. "An Association Between the Kinship and Fertility of Human Couples," *Science*, no. 319 (February 8, 2008). <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/319/5864/813.full>.

Archibald, Elyzabeth. *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ármann Jakobsson. "Beware of the Elf!: A Note on the Eavolving Meaning of the Word Álfar"." *Folklore*, no. 126 (2015)

———. "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of the Icelanders." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, no. 104 (2005)

Bagge, Sverre. *Society and Politics in Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. Oxford: University of California Press, 1991.

Clark, David. *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Csapo, Eric. *Theories of Mythology*. Ancient Cultures 1. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Dumézil, Georges. *La saga de Hadingus (Saxo Grammaticus I, V-V-VIII)*. Bibliothèque de l'école des hautes études, section des sciences religieuses 66. Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1953.

———. *Mythe et épopée, L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Bibliothèque des sciences humaines. Paris: Gallimard, 1968.

Gunnell, Terry. "How Elvish Were the Álfar?" In *Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2007.

Hermann, Pernille. "Íslendigabók and History." In *Reflection on Old Norse Myths*. Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 2007.

Larrington, Carolyne. *Brothers and Sisters in Medieval European Literature*. Rochester: York Medieval Press, 2015.

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Mythologiques, Le Cru et Le Cuit*. Vol. 1. 4 vols. Paris: Plon, 1964.
- . *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Edited by Needham Rodney. Translated by James Harle Bell and John Richard Von Sturmer. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- Lindow, John. *Murder and Vengeance among the Gods: Baldr in Scandinavian Mythology*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1997.
- . “Myth Read as History: Odin in Snorri Sturluson’s Ynglinga Saga.” In *Myth a New Symposium*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.
- . *Norse Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- McKinnell, John. “Why Did Christians Continue to Find Pagan Myths Useful?” In *Reflection on Old Norse Myths*, 33–50. Studies in Viking and Medieval Scandinavia 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 2007.
- Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking, Feud, Law and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *Qu’est-Ce Que La Priorité?* Paris: A. Lacroix et Co éditeurs, 1873. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k111212d/f2.item.r=le%20vol>.
- Ross, Margaret Clunies. *Prolonged Echoes*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. The Viking Collection 7. Viborg: Odense University Press, 1994.
- Sørensen, Preben Meulengracht. “Murder in Marital Bed: An Attempt at Understanding a Crucial Scene in Gísla Saga.” In *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature, New Approach to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism*. Viborg: Odense University Press, 1986.
- Spiro, Melford E. *Oedipus in the Trobriand*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Torfi Tulinius. *La “Matière du Nord” Sagas légendaires et fiction dans la littérature islandaise en prose du XIIIème siècle*. Voix Germaniques. Paris: Presse de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995.
- Veyne, Paul. *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*. Translated by Paula Wissing. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- . *Quand Notre Monde Est Devenu Chrétien (312-394)*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2007.
- Westermarck, Edward. *The History of Human Marriage*. London: Macmillan and Co., Limited., 1903.
- Whaley, Diana. *Heimskringla, An Introduction*. Viking Society for Northern Research 8. London: University College London, 1991.