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**Hugvísindasvið**

***Big Men During the  
Icelandic Commonwealth***

**Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs**

**Santiago F. Barreiro Figueroa**

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## Abstract

In the last four decades some scholarly attention has been drawn to the parallels between prominent men in commonwealth Iceland and the Big Men, an anthropological category originally derived from Melanesian examples. These parallels tend to use these concepts rather vaguely. By comparing chosen cases of ambitious men taken from the *Íslendingasögur* and the *Sturlunga* compilation, the applicability of the category to commonwealth Iceland is assessed. The Icelandic Big Man differs primarily from the ideal type in an enhanced relevance of family ties as determinant for his rise to power. The presence of institutional ties, in the form of a formal position of *goði* or ties with the Church, is a secondary but relevant difference with the ideal type. Access to the role of Big Man seems to have been limited to men of good family, and thus exclusive to ambitious men who lacked it. The association between kinship and rank, possibly inherited from continental models, also promoted a more stable position for the leaders which simplified its transformation into more permanent modes of leadership in the late commonwealth.

Keywords: Big Man, Iceland, commonwealth, anthropology, exchange, leadership.

## Table of Contents.

1. Introduction	3
1.1 The usage of Big Man in Scandinavian studies	5
2. A typification of the Big Man	11
3. The historical context: Iceland during the commonwealth period	15
4. Case Studies	
4.1 Oddr Ófeigsson	17
4.2 Arnkell goði	21
4.3 Ögmundur Helgason	26
4.4 Kálfr Guttormsson	29
4.5 Sturla Þórðarson	34
5. Conclusion	
5.1 Some remarks about the cases, and a hypothesis.	42
5.2 Hænsa-Þórir	44
5.3 Þórhallr ölkofri	45
5.4 Auðunn	46
5.5 Final Remarks	48
 Bibliography	 52
 Appendix 1	 57
Appendix 2	68

## ***Big Men* during the Icelandic commonwealth.**

### **1. Introduction**

The socio-political structure of commonwealth<sup>1</sup> era Iceland (c.870-1262/4) has been the subject of abundant scholarly attention since at least the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> and continues to be so, in a scope that exceeds the historiography of purely local Icelandic processes. Instead, it has been an integral part of the problems analysed in the discussion of the transformation of European societies during the Middle Ages<sup>3</sup>.

Of the diverse approaches that have been used to describe that structure, a view gathering concepts from anthropological theory has proven to be fruitful in the past three decades. A concept recurrently mentioned<sup>4</sup> in these works is the *Big Man*. It became established<sup>5</sup> after its delimitation as an ideal type by Sahlins (1963), who defined its features and contrasted it with chiefs<sup>6</sup>. He based it in Melanesian and Polynesian examples, while at the same time aiming to promote it as a wide-scope concept (as it is done in Sahlins 1972). Most authors who mention this analogy usually point to some parallels between some leading medieval Icelanders and the

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<sup>1</sup> I choose the term instead of alternative proposals (such as “Free State”) for no other particular reason than conventional usage. It is clear that this commonwealth has nothing to do with figures like the modern British commonwealth.

<sup>2</sup> The fundamental works are those of German scholars such as Konrad Maurer or Andreas Heusler, which (over?) emphasized the role of legal dispositions, as expected from German historians of their period.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in Wickham’s *Framing the Middle Ages* (2005: 373-375), which also uses the parallel with Big Men for Iceland, but extends it applicability to other societies in the Middle Ages. Wickham has been quite explicit on his opinion about the object we discuss in this thesis: “Goðar were, in fact, what anthropologists who work on New Guinea call ‘big men’” (Wickham 1992: 240). Another example of the insertion of anthropologically-inspired readings of Icelandic material into the bigger picture of medieval Europe is given by Cowell (2007), who draws heavily from Miller’s *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*. A similar interest lays behind in many of the articles in *Gripla* 20. In one of them Bagge even uses, yet in a quite inconclusive way, the concept of Big Man (Bagge 2009: 50-52)

<sup>4</sup> A preliminary step is to survey these references in scholarship as extensively as possible. They are recurrent in the writing of the “American school”. For example, Byock’s *Viking age Iceland* uses the term sparingly yet recurrently (Byock 2001: 3, 65-66, 217, 342), as does Miller’s *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (Miller 1990: 13, 26, 34, 40-41, 84, 187, 202, 214, 240-242, 246-247, 278, 282, 306, 331, 362, 369). See chapter 1.1.

<sup>5</sup> This happened after several decades of loose, non-conceptual usage and coexistence with alternative terms like “headman”, “centerman” or “manager” (Lindstrom 1981). It has been criticized as too typological and not actually reflective of the plethora of different forms of political organization found in Melanesia (f.ex. by Douglas 1979). As with any typology, this criticism is valid only as long as the differences are so widespread to render the type unusable at a general level, while some variety and deviance in detail should be taken for granted.

<sup>6</sup> Which have also been typified by Sahlins himself in that article, and also in a rather more detailed form, and on its own instead of comparatively by Earle (1987).

Big Men. Nevertheless, the analogy could be rather loose and scant attention has been devoted to clarify how close in fact are the social traits in commonwealth Iceland and the Pacific, and if the concept is actually useful as an analytical tool to improve our understanding of medieval Iceland, or if the analogy is just superficial or even impertinent.

Therefore, our purpose in this work is to clarify this usage. The procedure is relatively straightforward. As any ideal type, Big Man could be first defined by enumeration of its characteristics; so our first task is to clearly identify those traits and list them. This list should then be contrasted with empirical evidence<sup>7</sup>. Sagas are the most useful sources for this purpose, especially those which build their narratives with verisimilitude and realistic style, as they create accounts that are believable as reflections of the universe of values and practices witnessed by medieval Icelanders, even if not necessarily in detailed fact. The preferable sub-genres are then the *Íslendingasögur* (“Sagas about early Icelanders”) and the sagas in the *Sturlunga* compilation, as both deal mostly with the dynamics of local Icelandic matters, as opposed to other verisimile sub-genres (like most *konungasögur*, “Sagas about kings”).

Yet, if we considered all the cases of upstart, ambitious men (this being *prima facie* the primary feature of any Big Man) which appear in those types of saga, the resulting list would be immense and far beyond the reach of this work. A selection of sources is therefore demanded, and five cases will be under scrutiny<sup>8</sup>: Arnkell goði (from *Eyrbyggja saga*), Oddr Ófeigsson (from *Bandamanna saga*), Ögmundur Helgason (from *Svínfellinga Saga*), Kálfr Guttormsson (from *Íslendinga saga*) and Sturla Þórðarson (as depicted in *Þorgils saga skarða*<sup>9</sup>). Their traits and career will be compared to those of the conceptual, typified Big Man. Therefore the answer will be in terms of proportion and not in pure affirmation or negation, as it is always the case with ideal

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<sup>7</sup> As Godelier (1986) pointed out, the Big Man is only meaningful if understood inside the general dynamics and structure of any given society. Therefore a short summary of the basic economic and political (which includes, but was not limited to, kinship ties) traits of the commonwealth-era Icelandic society should be commented before entering the analysis of particular cases. These variations can alter radically the role of Big Men in those societies. For example, see the impact of matrilineal descent on Big Man-ship possibilities in Melanesia by Allen (1984). On the impact of Church leadership in the same area, see White (1980).

<sup>8</sup> There frequently mentioned sagas will be abbreviated in the quotations, followed by chapter: page number. *Eyrbyggja saga* will be *Ey.*, *Bandamanna saga*, *Ba.*, *Svínfellinga saga*, *Sv.*, *Íslendinga Saga*, *Ís.*, and *Þorgils saga skarða*, *Þo.* Other primary sources will be quoted by their full name. *Bandamanna Saga* is quoted from Hallvard Magerøy’s edition, while quotations from *Eyrbyggja* come from the standard ÍF volume. The sagas in *Sturlunga* are all quoted from the standard 1946 edition.

<sup>9</sup> Which is probably a more reliable source on him than his own accounts of himself (and his family) in other parts of *Sturlunga*. The same is true for other accounts on these characters which might be useful, like the romantic *Odds þátr Ófeigssonar*, which also centers around the protagonist of *Bandamanna Saga*.

types; “How close are these ambitious medieval Icelanders to Big Men?” is a more appropriate question to ask than “Were they Big Men?”.

The order of scrutiny is not fundamentally relevant, as we are not aiming to set up a strict chronological order, but a broader sense of change. It is then reasonable to work first on the *Íslendingasögur* cases, and then proceed with the *Sturlunga* cases. The straightforward narrative of *Bandamanna saga* is probably better to begin with than the complex *Eyrbyggja*; on the *Sturlunga* examples, the examples of the less historically prominent Ögmundr and Kálfr are surely a simpler start than *Sturla*.

### 1.1 The usage of *Big Man* in Scandinavian studies<sup>10</sup>

The usage of the concept of “Big Man”<sup>11</sup> in Scandinavian studies is already attested in 1971, when the British anthropologist Victor Turner used it in his article *An Anthropological approach to the Icelandic Saga*, published in a *festschrift* volume for Prof. Evans-Pritchard. The term was used only in passing, but created a trend that would be repeated in later studies:

As in New Guinea today among the so-called “big men”, a *goði*’s influence depended on such things as physical strength, personal fame, and skill at arms, just as much as on birth and inherited wealth. A man’s power might wane with age, feuds would take toll of his children and kin, while younger *goðar* might wax in power and influence around him. The very attribute which gave him most fame, generosity in providing feasts for his own people, and helping them to pay debts and *wergild*, might be that which impoverished him most decisively. Giving to win and keep followers depletes wealth and loses followers. Thus much depended on a man’s present achievements and less on his past glories or family name. (Turner 2001 [1971]: 365-366)

This mention was made eight years after Sahlins published his famous article and does not quote it directly, yet is obvious that a leading scholar such as Turner was up-to-date in the current trends of Anglo-Saxon anthropology of the day. Here appear two interesting points: one, is that for him the only figure akin to Big Men are the *goðar*, and that he adds birth and inherited wealth (and not self-made wealth) as being as much relevant as personal qualities are, yet all of them are secondary to redistribution.

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<sup>10</sup> Sadly, and due to my difficulties to read modern Icelandic, this review mostly ignores the work of authors whose most fundamental writings have been published in that language.

<sup>11</sup> As different from a very literal translation of the Old Norse compound *stórmenni* (important men, men of rank).

The direct inheritors of Turner will be those scholars that do what Gísli Pálsson calls “saga-oriented ethnography”<sup>12</sup>, and which include the American E.P. Durrenberger and himself, both anthropologists. They are contrasted with those that produce what he calls “ethnographically oriented saga-scholarship” (Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 90), a much larger group. In his *The textual life of the savants*, he discusses Big Men (Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 91-98), actively proposing Melanesian ethnographic models as useful to analyse commonwealth Iceland. He points out some analogies with Godelier’s *Great man*, emphasizing the divinely-rooted etymology of the word *goði*, and its links with particular magic knowledge and religious pre-Christian practices (Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 94). This is rather speculative, as the actual *goðar* described in the sagas are devoid generally of any (pagan) religious connotations, with a few exceptions.<sup>13</sup>

Following Turner, Gísli Pálsson prefers the figure of Big Man as an example for the *goði*, but he remarks some differences. He writes that "no doubt, there are important differences between the Hagen Big Man and the *goði* of the Icelandic commonwealth, for instance with respect to kinship (...)", but "as we shall see, however, judging from many saga accounts, the roles and powers of commonwealth leaders, whether *goði*, *höfðingi*, *mikilmenni* or *stórmenni*, were quite similar to those attributed to the Melanesian Big Men" (Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 95).

He then points out that the position of *goðar*, even if sometimes was inherited, was unstable and insecure. He also remarks that generosity was linked with it, as was the institution of friendship in the ties between the *goði* and *þingmenn* (who are said to be able to leave his *goði* at will; Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 96) while the use of reciprocity and gifting were based on the idea of a presence of the giver in the gift<sup>14</sup> as the grounds to sustain those relationships. And he repeats "Perhaps, then, one could speak of the Icelandic *goðar* as "Big Men of the north" (Gísli Pálsson 2004 [1995]: 96). His account is an updated and more careful reassessment of the Turnerian identification between *goði* and Big Man; his mention of other categories (the

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<sup>12</sup> Another anthropologist working on medieval Icelandic society avoids the concept of “Big man” in her work, but translates regularly *goði* as “chief” (Hastrup 1985, esp. 105-135).

<sup>13</sup> Hrafnkell from *Hrafnkels saga freysgoða* is the best known example, while being at the same time the most famous case to prove the literary, fictional nature of *Íslendingasögur* (Sigurður Nordal’s *Hrafnkatla*, and the subsequent debate over it).

<sup>14</sup> Taken from Maussian theory through Gurevich (1968).



non-institutionalized *höfðingi*, *mikilmenni*<sup>15</sup> and *stórmenni*) quickly disappears back into the opinion that *goðar* are the group to take into account. He points out differences, and his reference to kinship as one of them might prove very fruitful and should be taken into account in our approach.

E.P.Durrenberger is also particularly spare in his use of the concept, which appears only once (Durrenberger 1992: 44-45) in his *The Dynamics of Medieval Iceland*. But this is misleading, as he takes the *goði* as analogous not only to the Melanesian Big Man and also to certain Thai “Headmen” he researched and that are later discussed (Durrenberger 1992:54). His discussion of the term is not heavily grounded on evidence from Iceland, and this might be attributed to the synthetic (but which risks being labelled simplistic) nature of his book, and to its conceptual emphasis, which is surely more attractive for an anthropologist than the “parochial and uninformed by social and cultural theory”, source-based attitude of historians (as he puts it in Durrenberger 1995: 228). More problematic are some contradictions in his conceptual terms. For example, he recurrently speaks of a “chieftainly class”, which therefore denies one of the necessary backgrounds of the idea of Big Men societies, which is competitive egalitarianism, thus leaving his usage of the concept in a rather indeterminate situation.

The other branch of Pálsson’s categories, “ethnographically oriented saga-scholarship” includes the work of several historians (like William Miller, Jón Víðar Sigurðsson or Jesse Byock), whose works surprisingly use the concept more frequently than their anthropologist colleagues. We are going to discuss some of them.

Byock’s *Viking Age Iceland*, a comprehensive book rooted in an interdisciplinary<sup>16</sup> approach, uses the term on some occasions. This is a novelty from his previous but similar (in matter) book, *Medieval Iceland* (Byock 1988) where the concept is absent. It was used by him in a short paper presented at Ninth Saga conference, where he noticed the similarity with the Melanesian case while adding “Icelandic leaders and their families were more successful than usual among Big Men in retaining their wealth and status over generations” (Byock 1994: 157) .

As can be seen in these paragraphs, he departs in some very important points from the Turnerian position:

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<sup>15</sup> Even while Gísli Pálsson mentions it, this term seems to lack any political meaning. (Gísli Pálsson 2004[1995]: 89, 95. On the first instance he translates it as “Great Man”).

<sup>16</sup> The main influences are historical, anthropological, archaeological and historiographical.

Leadership was limited to local chieftains who often operated like “big men”, individuals whose authority often was temporary (...) Icelandic society shares many characteristics of “ranked” societies, which often include significant numbers of small-scale farmers who exhibit formalized, if limited, social differences. “Big Men” tend to assume leadership roles in ranked societies. Icelandic leaders in many ways resemble such individuals, but again the comparison is not exact. In particular, Icelandic social arrangements provided for more continuity of power than did arrangements usually found in big-man societies. Although the *goðar* often acted like big men, they can better be described as small-scale Scandinavian chiefs. (Byock 2001: 65-66. A similar but shorter account in page 3.)

In many ways the [Sturlung-age] *stórbændr* operated as local big men or small-scale chieftains, much as earlier *goðar* did. They led interest groups of local farmers and offered protection and legal services. The *stórbændr* were cut from the same cloth as ambitious *bændr*. (Byock 2001: 342)

First, for him not only the (early) *goðar* were akin to Big Men, but also the later *stórbændr* (“big farmers”). But both these categories are closer to chiefs, thus placing them between both ideal types. The influence of social theory in this book is deep<sup>17</sup>, yet for Byock theory is less an end in itself than a tool for understanding the specific society under scrutiny<sup>18</sup>. His image of the relationship between the early Big Men-like chieftains and followers emphasizes reciprocity and mutual benefit (Byock 2001: 134-137), and the limitations to the power of chieftains (Byock 2001: 99-102, 126-128).

William Miller uses “big men” very often in his *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*<sup>19</sup>. His usage of the term is loose, but it generally (there are exceptions like Miller 1990: 40) fits with the idea of Big Men as deriving their power from a strategic use of force, persuasion and redistribution. In some cases, this is contrasted with legal procedures:

In the mid-thirteenth century there are mentions of big men exacting sheep tax to maintain their retinues. These payments could be forcibly exacted and equally forcibly resisted, but they were ad hoc and not a legal prerogative of a chieftaincy so much as an incident of brute power (Miller 1990: 26. Discussing *goðar* generally)

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<sup>17</sup> Names like Robert Carneiro, Maurice Godelier, Marshall Sahlins, Michael Mann, Timothy Earle or Leopold Popišil appear both in his text and in the bibliography, together with the anthropologists, who work in the specific field of Scandinavian Studies, like the aforementioned Durrenberger and Gísli Pálsson, or others like Kirsten Hastrup.

<sup>18</sup> In this he continues a tradition of medievalists using anthropology as a source for concepts, following figures like Aron Gurevich or Georges Duby, and akin to the work of other historians in the same field, like Agnetta Breisch or Helgi Þórlaksson. A good theoretical survey, used as an introduction for a book about the formation of the State in another Scandinavian area is provided by Line (2007:1-33).

<sup>19</sup> Above, footnote 4.

Typically big men were able to make their willingness to submit to arbitration contingent upon stipulations that denied the arbitrators any authority to adjudge exile or the loss of a chieftaincy or home estate. Such stipulations limited the arbitrators to awards of moveable property, although these at times could be quite substantial. Those awards that were paid in full were often partially or wholly funded by third parties (Miller 1990: 278. Also 286, 369)

He also adds an important element of ideology as fuelling Big Man-ship:

By the end of the commonwealth certain big men, although still obsessed with the ideology of honour and still imbued with the heroic ethos, were no longer constrained or constrainable by the levelling mechanisms of the game. The field had grown too small, the players too powerful. This led to ambitions of overlordship for the big men (Miller 1990 : 41. Discussing *stórgoðar*)

The first steps toward state formation in Iceland were made by Churchmen, who had the model of the Roman Church and Rome itself available to them and by the big men intent on imitating Norwegian royal style. Early state formation, I would guess, surely tended to involve redistributions, not from rich to poor, however, but from poor to rich, from weak to strong (Miller 1990: 306).

As is to be expected from the theme of the book, his main interest is placed in the legal role of Big Men manoeuvring. He emphasizes the exploitative (like in *Arfsal* agreements. Miller 1990: 362) rather than the reciprocal nature of these relationships, which are seen as patronage even when they were labelled “friendship” (Miller 1990: 331). In the same vein, he asserts the material dominance of these Big Men over common people:

[If an intended target for revenge, the big man was] as a matter of logistics (...) harder to get at. He was unlikely to travel unattended, his household would be well populated and hence well defended, and his position was often the consequence of his own demonstrated courage and disputing skills (Miller 1990: 202)

On the other hand, his chronology is not very clear, and while he follows the consensus that there was a concentration of power in the late commonwealth, his usage of the term does

not relate clearly to this change. In fact, his usage is rather loose and sometimes “big man” seems to be more a synonym for “important man” than a conceptual tool<sup>20</sup>.

Much more precise in its usage of the concept is the thesis of the Norwegian historian Hanne Monclair, *Lederskapideologi på Island i det trettende århundret*. She discusses explicitly the theoretical framework for the diverse thesis on leadership, and the reception of the article by Sahlins by other anthropologists (Monclair 2004: 40-43. See also 141-142). Her review of social theory, both on purely theoretical terms and as applied to Scandinavian studies is impressive (See Monclair 2004: 61-74, 135-141, 195-199). The central point is the contrast she proposes<sup>21</sup>:

Typene til tross, i den ene enden en leder overveiende av big-man-type der koblingen mellom sterk konkurranseorientering og redistribusjon står sentralt, i den andre en mer stabil, hierarkisk og i datidige termer *rex iustus*-influert leder, må vi ha disse nyansene in mente. (Monclair 2004: 43)

The *rex iustus*, a medieval term turned into an analytical tool by modern medievalists and applied to a specific ideology of central-middle ages monarchy, replaces here the Polynesian Chief as the antagonist of the Big Man. Monclair’s book is consistent with this picture, and it proposes as a primordial (*overordnet*) hypothesis an evolution in the ideology from the former to latter that happened gradually, with the main shifting point placed at the middle point of the century under scrutiny (Monclair 2004: 248). This change is reflected in the way the gift-giving, hospitality and personal appearance are presented in a corpus of eleven sagas spanning from the early 10<sup>th</sup> to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century and put to vellum in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, according to averages in dating. There is a transformation in the behavioural models of the aristocracy, from the Big Man type to others, derived from the influence of clerical dignity, chivalric culture, or royal service aristocracy (Monclair 2004: 261-270). What is important about her

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<sup>20</sup> His bibliography points towards the same direction: he lists Sahlins’ *Stone Age Economics* in the bibliography, but he does not use it directly to discuss Big Men, nor does he use other anthropological theorists of the subject. A similar trend is present in Jón Viðar Sigurdsson’s *Chieftains and Power in the Icelandic commonwealth*, who describes the relationship between chieftains and *þingmenn* in terms of patronage, but whose arguments are clearly influenced on theories of the Big Men (Sahlins’ article is even directly quoted once in the book. Jón Viðar Sigurdsson 1999: 135). Sverrir Jakobsson (2009) uses the same anthropologically-inspired vocabulary, but also avoids the term Big Man itself. To some extent, this anthropological vocabulary is now used in mainstream explanations of the social structure of medieval Iceland, as can be seen from introductory books such as Vésteinn Ólason’s *Dialogues with the Viking Age* (1998: 27-31).

<sup>21</sup> Of course, she makes clear these are not categories to be found *i ren form*, but analytical tools placed in the extreme ends of a continuum.

work is that for her, the ideology is at the same time derived from actual forms of social behaviour, and it is also productive for those models<sup>22</sup>.

## 2. A typification of the *Big Man*

The Big Man is an ideal type and as such it should be first defined by an enumeration of its characteristics. That is what Marshall Sahlins did in his opening article on the matter, where he contrasted the Melanesian Big Man with the Polynesian Chief (Sahlins 1963). A survey of the article reveals a number of traits associated with Big Men. The Big Man operates in a small scale, with a group of followers that cannot exceed the hundreds<sup>23</sup>, over which he has direct influence; disobedient followers will be publicly harangued by him.

On the other hand, he has indirect influence over the “general public” due to his own fame. He therefore can only instigate mass collective action in association with other Big Men, but those others are at the same time in competition with him.

He combines an interest in the general welfare (for example, attending local people in need), with expectations to get back help from those he helped with calculating self-interest, and shows accordingly a competitive entrepreneurial mentality and a tendency to self-display. His power, and this is the key element, is *personal* instead of institutional (in the broad sense of the word). Moreover, the less it depends on lineage, the closer to the ideal type we are. Personal power goes hand in hand with personal qualities like great rhetoric and magical powers. He is a fisher of men; starting with his household, he collects dependant kin and gains followers through redistribution of previously hoarded wealth<sup>24</sup>, either by agonistic, potlatch-like ceremonial give-aways of public nature, or through taking care of the obligations of his

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<sup>22</sup> Seen negatively, this would make the book ambiguous on the question of the origin of ideology (i.e. “Is ideological discourse reflective of social order, or social order is, at least in part, produced by ideologically oriented discourse?”). An ambiguous answer, like “they influence each other”, seems preferable (or at least more cautious) to a definite, causal point of view.

<sup>23</sup> Even an opposer of evolutionary and all-encompassing perspectives like Mosko (1995: 781) still sees in this difference of size a way to distinguish Chiefs from big men / headmen. His article also presents a short but very useful survey of the different models proposed to analyse the best-known social system for the area on which the model of Big Man / Chief was based on, the Trobriand islanders (Mosko 1995: 764-766).

<sup>24</sup> The classical example of redistributed goods are food, drink (in feasts) and pigs (as a standard valued commodity). For Iceland, beer is particularly important as a drink, and *vaðmál* might have played the role of pigs. My limitations with modern Icelandic prevented me from making good use of it, but the importance of *vaðmál* and the nature of redistribution were researched by Helgi Þorláksson (1991)

“allies” (for example, paying their legal compensations or bride-wealths). This loyalty has to be built and constantly reinforced. There is nothing stable in it.

A few of its traits are particularly local: he might buy higher ranks in secret societies to buy status, and his gardening prowess is important (we are dealing with horticultural societies). Read more abstractly, these could be thought as an ability to manage the production of his own household and the wish to enter exclusive organizations which entitle and mark him as having influence and status.

But as his career of amassing power through followers advances, the Big Man starts exploiting his own followers, delaying his reciprocal give-backs. Sooner or later this creates discontent inside the group and leads to waning influence of this particular Big Man, as he must distribute more resources away from his own faction, while trying to expand into bigger spheres of the political game, trying to build supra-local organizations. Therefore the individual Big Men have a tendency to not last through generations<sup>25</sup>, even the most successful leaders. If somehow he is able to transfer his power and prestige, or to lessen their tendency to need constant reinforcement (i. e. if he manages to institutionalize it), he starts to move towards a Chief-type: for example, through the creation of prestigious dynasty, where power is related to socially inherited rank.

Further comments on the Big Man were added by Maurice Godelier in his *La production des Grands Hommes*<sup>26</sup>, as he compares the Big Man with the “Great Man (*Grand Homme*)” he found among the Baruya of New Guinea. He grounds his comparison in Sahlins’s theory, emphasizing the merit-needed and non-inheritable bases of the power of a Big Man. He remarks that Big Men build their power through the application of the principle of reciprocity, and that this power is usually at odds with -but above- other existing paths to power available in that society: holiness and martial prowess. In a structuralist fashion, he insists that the picture of any Big Man society is distorted if the other ways that lead to power available in that society are not described alongside it (Godelier 1986: 166).

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<sup>25</sup> But Big Men could nevertheless try to make their prestige pass to their children with some degree of success, even while this is difficult (Strathern 1971: 211). Two other interesting points are noted by him. One is the idea that the attributes of Big Men are personally in deep contrast with the men of the most inferior rank in society, the “rubbish men” (Strathern 1971: 187). The second is the suggestion that limited resources for redistribution could lead to small amounts of give-away practices (like his *moka*, *pottatch*, or other forms of feasting), and thus closing the possibilities for competition into Big Man-ship. That would lead to a more stable group of Big Men, who could become despotic (Strathern 1971: 225).

<sup>26</sup> The English translation has been titled *The making of great men*, and is the edition we follow. It appeared four years after the original.

In fact, he makes clear that the Big Man type is only available as long as certain social conditions are given; wealth could (and should) be produced for the exchange of women, and for legal (compensations) or religious matters (sacrifices, offerings); “in other words, there is no equivalence between life and life” (Godelier 1986: 171). Moreover, it must be possible to exchange wealth for most other things, and that the type of reciprocity should be balanced<sup>27</sup>, allowing competitive outdoing. Later he re-lists the main traits of the Big Man; some of his highlighted points deserve being mentioned, as they add to the original typification by Sahlins. The Big Man is an arbitrator in disputes, both between clans and inside lineages, pacifying violent youngsters. He also bequeaths his children with wealth, a name and partners in other tribes which they might use to obtain their own fame<sup>28</sup>. And female labour<sup>29</sup> within the household of the Big Man is crucial to produce a material base for the redistribution which needs not to be reciprocated on balanced terms, and is thus more stable than the resources exacted from the help of the retinue.

To this “classical” Big Man, Lindstrom (1984) added another, which based his power on non-material grounds but on the use of knowledge obtained by mediation (i. e. derived from supernatural ancestors and cultural heroes) in the Tannese society he studied. This knowledge, partly operational (i. e. information) but mostly interpretative, stems from a unlimited but ancestral set of knowledge to which access is gained access by men through inspiration. The expandable and modifiable nature of knowledge makes those who control its production through dreaming dominant and so able to obtain goods and loyalty in exchange.

In such a system, the reception of the new knowledge is fundamental, as anybody could potentially try to create/receive it. Yet, the system only works as long as actual holders of knowledge are able to disqualify the ideas of newcomers if they become too many and also as long as they can release their own knowledge slowly, because both situations would destabilize

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<sup>27</sup> As defined by Sahlins (1972: 185-276), in contrast with the extreme positive end (*Generalized* reciprocity, where the parts do not calculate what is to be given back) and the extreme negative end (*Negative* reciprocity, where the aim is to take more than one gives). *Balanced* reciprocity includes many forms of exchange which range from quite sociable, tie binding practices (most forms of non-competitive gift exchanges) to purely neutral, depersonalized exchange (modern market exchange), and some actually quite aggressive (outdoing, potlatch-like-logs). Both competitive and non-competitive sociable modes of balanced reciprocity are particularly useful for Big Man strategies.

<sup>28</sup> But, could not be this be a seed for the perpetuation of power?. This point is important to understand the middle points in the (at least typological, and maybe evolutionary) transition from Big Men to Chiefs, and its link with kinship structure and ideology. See also note 25 above.

<sup>29</sup> We should extend the reach into “labour from any dependent in the household”, like a slave or servant.

the actual worth of knowledge. Lindstrom (1984: 304) suggests that this system is prone to appear where material exchange leads to egalitarian distribution, yet this is no absolute dichotomy (1984: 306).

The traits included by these authors are generally complementary rather than contradictory. The original typification echoed strongly both substantivist economic anthropology (whose milestone book, *Stone Age Economics*, was written by the same author who typified the Big Man) and the neo-evolutionist interest on typifying the evolution of social structures. The influence of French neo-Marxism<sup>30</sup> fits more or less harmonically in these patterns, as Marxism old and new had a strong evolutionist tendency right from the beginning<sup>31</sup>. Thus Godelier's contributions expand rather than contradict the substantivist work of Sahlins<sup>32</sup>. Godelier also displays strong influence by Levi-Straussian structuralism, and this brings some difference, as he insists that Big Men should be understood inside each *whole* social system, while the original typification by Sahlins is more impressionistic and centred in itself. The risk of this last approach is that it might end up de-historizing the Big Man and turning it into a all-too-general pattern, which therefore loses explicative power (See Godelier 1989). While the rejection of the typology itself solves this problem, it loses the benefits of comparative and theoretical thought and can reduce the problems to too specific, over-empirical discussions (like in Mosko 1995). That method is especially weak for inquiries into historical anthropology, as the nature of the sources tend to require strong degrees of theoretically-aided critical reading, as they could not be expanded in the same way a modern ethnographic informant could. A position akin to Godelier's -to use the typological tool as long as we know specifically in which society it operates- seems therefore the preferable course of action. The next chapter tries briefly to supply this need.

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<sup>30</sup> Similar in aim (while still presenting important differences with the work of Godelier), is the *Femmes, greniers et capitaux* of Claude Meillassoux. It is centred in earlier stages of structural development (the "domestic mode of production") and therefore it does not reach the organizational level of Big Man societies and escapes our review.

<sup>31</sup> Especially thanks to the strong influence of Lewis Morgan on Engels, whose *On the Origins of the State, Family and Private property* is a rereading in a Marxist key of Morgan's *Ancient Society*. There are differences in theory between substantivists (who see culture as determining socio-economic relationships) and Marxists (who see socio-economic relationships determining culture), but in empirical analysis differences prove to be rather small.

<sup>32</sup> As a side note, to consider "knowledge" a resource that can be manipulated through circulation in the same vein as pigs, beer or any of the subsistence goods used by redistributive powerful men, we need to shift away towards a more formalist, utilitarian definition of "economic goods", on a line similar to that of Fredrik Barth (in works like his *Economic Spheres in Darfur*) and theoretically opposed to the substantivist grounds of Big-Man theory. As Strathern (1971: XII) noted, a full analysis of economy will require to apply both perspectives.



### 3. The historical context: Iceland during the commonwealth period

As we have seen, one of the most important criticisms made to the concept of Big Man is that it should not be understood in purely abstract terms, but rather in the context of general social patterns which enable it to exist, never “separated from an accurate analysis of the social structures within which anthropology first located him” (Godelier 1989: 475) . Yet this does not disqualify from trying to use the concept in other social contexts than contemporary Melanesia. In fact, even there it appears empirically in forms quite different from its ideal typification. So before starting to analyse the cases under scrutiny, we should review the main elements of the commonwealth-era Icelandic society in which those men operated<sup>33</sup>.

Iceland was during the commonwealth a state-less society in the strict sense, as there was no monopoly of the legitimate use of force. In other terms, it lacked any executive power. It had an advanced and rich judiciary and legislative system, but whose decisions depended on the force of particulars to be put in practice. Thus negotiation exceeded by far the strictly legal procedures, and manoeuvring in the arena of conflict management was a source of both power and prestige which would very hard to distinguish from political power.

The basic element of society was the household. Settlement was disperse, and there were not any villages or towns. The farms included a central nuclear family as their core to which some dependant members were added. Kinship was bilateral, ego-centered, and descent from both maternal and paternal was important, but more weight was given to the paternal side, giving males preference in inheritance, but also assigning them duties of guardianship over infants and unmarried women (Hastrup 1985: 70-72). Marriage included bride-wealth<sup>34</sup> and was arranged by the guardian of the woman<sup>35</sup>. It was monogamous. Nevertheless, female concubines were allowed and common. Only the children born from free concubines had some (but not equal) rights to inheritance, thus contributing to preserve property for the wedlock-born offspring. Marriage was an important public affair, and it involved widespread feasting. Divorce seems to have been relatively easy before Christianization, but later it required episcopal approval, which restricted the flexibility of marital arrangements.

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<sup>33</sup> There are plenty of useful surveys of the matter. Those used here are: Helgi Þorláksson 2005, Byock 2001, Jón Jóhanesson 1974. More specific, but also useful have been Miller 1986, Hastrup 1985, Gelsing 1981.

<sup>34</sup> Which was kept in theory by the female herself, not by her guardian. But it was thereafter administered by the husband. Dowries were not mandatory for marrying, but they were normal.

<sup>35</sup> Usually, her father. The only exception to the rule were widows.

Besides marriage, fostering was a widespread way to create ties through fictive kinship and was “paid either in money or in support” (Hastrup 1985: 98). It was a direct path to increase the resource/power base of the giver, as it saved him the expenses of raising a youngster. Full adoption also existed, but did not involve such obvious political features as fostering did.

The difference between public and private spheres was (predictably) blurry, but most activities we would classify as “public” were restricted to and/or dominated by free adult males. The head of the household was usually, but not always, a male.

The Icelanders distinguished between free and unfree, even far after the actual practice of slavery disappeared, a process which happened gradually during the course of the eleventh century. Slaves could become free<sup>36</sup>, while freemen could fall into a special kind of slavery through debt; in all cases, the slave seems not have been the basic element of the productive system<sup>37</sup>. In other words, there was no true slavery. The (adult male) free were basically<sup>38</sup> equal on legal terms, yet there were considerable differences in wealth. There were landless peasants (who could have worked as tenants, cottagers or labourers), small landowners, and (relatively) rich landowners<sup>39</sup>. Some (unpredictable and low-yielding<sup>40</sup>) agricultural production, plus some fishing and fowling supplemented animal husbandry, which was the main production and the biggest source of surplus. The most important livestock were cattle and sheep<sup>41</sup> and horses were also significant. As the winter conditions were harsh, a good supply of hay was usually very important, especially during years of bad weather when pastures were not yielding as usually. This required both lands with extra pastures and available labour to mow the hay, and even with proper foresight, bad years made it quite unstable, thus making hay precious. Grain was expensive, so its by-products also were; especially ale, which held a very relevant social role, as it was distributed in feasts. Trade with foreign countries, especially Norway, provided

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<sup>36</sup> But freedmen were still tied to their former master by law on certain provisions: the master had to provide the means for a pauper freedman, but had the right to inherit him (and receive compensation for his killing) if he had no legal inheritors.

<sup>37</sup> These slaves are radically different from the ancient mass of slaves in the *villae* or the plantation slaves of modern history. On the differences between types of slavery, see Meillasoux (1988)

<sup>38</sup> But it seems that only freeholders had the right to decide on the commune (*breppr*. Jón Jóhanesson 1974: 348).

<sup>39</sup> Unsurprisingly, the concentration of power and the concentration of unmovable property are parallel processes. Thus, late-commonwealth Iceland involved more clear differences between farmers, and the creation of a (quasi-) aristocratic top layer. On the other hand, slavery disappeared.

<sup>40</sup> It was limited by less than optimal climate and, particularly, by poor soils, and therefore heavily dependant on local manure, requiring both animals and labour (Simpson et al. 2002).

<sup>41</sup> The relative importance of sheep grew from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

many elements, both of prime necessity (like lumber) and luxury goods. The *goðar* held priority rights over incoming trade (Byock 2001: 255-260). They had some means to set the prices of tradable goods, and especially they had the first pick on any incoming commodities, which granted them an advantage in picking luxury goods, which were easily capitalized into prestige by either display or gifting. The exportable goods were mostly textiles (especially *vaðmál*) plus wool and hides, with sulphur and falcons playing secondary roles. Private ownership of land was the norm, and there was no allodial tenancy<sup>42</sup>. *Goðorð* (the office of a *goði*, which granted him special legislative and judicial attributions) was considered untaxable, private and movable property.

Expectably, the best land and farms were owned by the richest and usually more prominent farmers. Farms were relatively similar as production units in terms of their activities, but they could be quite different in size. The division of labour was placed more inside the households than between them; until the late-commonwealth period (after 1200), the gap between a *goði* and a prosperous “big farmer” was not so pronounced. In this, it follows the norm of many pre-industrial societies, where social status is less a fixed matter (as it is in a caste system or any purely aristocratic milieu) than a series of more or less variable steps in prestige.

It is then clear that the fundamental of the structures of this society were malleable enough for individuals to try to manipulate them on their behalf. Kinship ties, both blood and fictive types, household strategies of production, consumption and accumulation, the legal-social sphere were all flexible enough to provide a framework for ambitious men (but not women) to rise into power. Structurally, there was potential for Big Man strategies. With this background into account, we will now proceed to analyse the chosen particular cases.

## 4. Case studies

### 4.1 Oddr Ófeigsson

*Bandamanna saga*, which is usually understood as a satire on the *goðar*, was probably written in the late XIIIth century,<sup>43</sup> after Iceland came under the dominion of the Norwegian monarchs and the (trans-)formation of the elite into a service aristocracy was already in process. This element might be determinant to the portrait in the saga of the old aristocracy as greedy and

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<sup>42</sup> But see page 32 below for a more nuanced view.

<sup>43</sup> Yet many diverse datings were proposed since the beginning (See ÍF VII: XCI, footnote 1).

dysfunctional, even if it is not necessary to read it as praise of the new type of service elite, which is absent from the story<sup>44</sup>.

Oddr, the protagonist of the saga (together with his father, Ófeigr) is at first sight one of the most likely candidates to be qualified as a Big Man appearing in any of the *Íslendingasögur*. Oddr's genealogy is introduced at the beginning of the saga; his father is a *þingmaðr* of an important *goði*, possessing extensive lands but short on movable property. His mother is said to come from a prominent family (*attstór kona*. Ba. 1:1), but its not mentioned which one and there is no certainty on this beyond scholarly guesses (ÍF VII, 293, ft. 2). Ófeigr was a hospitable man, but he was not on good terms with his son. He in turn was an able man, but not a man with "a mind for working" (*verklundarmaðr* Ba. 1:1). Yet Oddr enjoyed local fame as the most accomplished man (*Sá orðrdómr lagðisk á at engi maðr þar í sveitum væri betr mennt en Oddr*, Ba. 1:1). He breaks with his father and leaves the household with empty hands. It is interesting to note that what helps him start over, what makes him look trustworthy as a loan taker, is not only his own fame but also his family reputation. (*Ok er þeir vissu att hans góða, en var vinsall sjálf, þá hatta þeir til þess at eiga at honum*. Ba. 1:2).

His disinclination to work might have then changed (forced by his new situation?), or it was just applicable to farm jobs. He becomes a good fisherman, and quickly enriches himself. At the same time he is popular with the other fishermen, as he repays all his debts carefully; his wealth comes from self-exploitation and luck. He then moves into bigger trades<sup>45</sup>, and becomes very rich and prestigious. He buys himself land, and settles down in Iceland. His material resources are plentiful. He has gold, silver, livestock and land (Ba. 2:3). Significantly,

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<sup>44</sup> Instead, the protagonist of the Saga might be seen as a kind of opportunistic "new man" which tried to benefit from the changing situation in the late XIIIth century in Iceland due to the reforms introduced by the Norwegian kings. This would lead to a more pessimistic reading of the saga on what concerns its utility for the situation in the Saga age. Some elements in the saga, like the emphasis on fishing, are surely better fit for the post-commonwealth era and might be anachronistic. Yet, we prefer to a more optimistic stance, as the general situation, the "social world" described in it is generally coherent with the structure of the eleventh century more than with those of the late thirteenth or the fourteenth. The same position will be taken in what regards *Eyrbyggja saga*. This does not imply the factual historicity of people like Oddr or Ófeigr (which is quite dubious as opposed to, say, Snorri Goði) or the punctual actions taken by any of them, but the plausibility of men like Oddr to exist in that period and to behave as they he does. This view, which it is necessarily partly a matter of intuition more than reason, has been argued for by Miller (1990: 44-51). Yet, to criticize these anthropologically-inspired kind of views by saying that it does not care for any reality but its own (as in Orri Vésteinsson 2005:10) is to forget that anthropological theory is also grounded on extensive comparison and synthesis from at least a century of integral study of hundreds of societies to create those models. I find very hard to deny that the structural similarities between the world imagined in *Íslendingasögur* and many well-attested societies grants as much (or more) weight to its reliability as sources for history than its inner narrative coherence.

<sup>45</sup> As Big Men do, he keeps in a high social sphere while abroad "He was often with chiefs and noblemen when out of the country" (*Han var oft með höfðingum ok tígnum mǫnnum útan lands*, Ba. 1:2)

he also buys himself a *godðorð*, which apparently was seen as inevitable to have for men of such status (*Einn blut þykkir mǫnnum at skorta at eigi sé ráð hans með allri sǣmð, at hann er maðr godðorðslauss*, Ba. 2:4). The saga suggests that his riches led to popularity, which translates into large amounts of men switching to him as their *goði*. Even if his will to help everybody (except his own father, Ba. 2:3) might have gone beyond pure distribution, it seems obvious that this constituted a big portion of the help he provided.

He is also materially rich in (and through) labourers; it seems clear that his riches increase due to excellent farm management (f.ex., Óspakr's disposition and skill, Ba. 3:5.) by him and his household. Moreover, he does not stop trading, and carefully builds a reliable labour force in his own household ("all think themselves well placed, those that are with you [Oddr]", *allir þykkjask þeir vel komnir er með er þér eru*, Ba. 2:4). His personal abilities to choose people able for the job seem to matter decisively and not be derived only from chance.

But this same growth also happens to debase his power after some point; his long-distance trading expeditions force him to delegate tasks in his able farm manager, Óspakr. Óspakr, who comes from a bad family<sup>46</sup> was ambitious and wanted to hold some power for himself. The saga suggests that he wanted to keep (*Grunar menn um at Óspakr myndi hafa atlat sér godðorði en eigi Oddi*, 4:8) the *godðorð* that Oddr temporarily granted him, a decision that was in first place a very risky one to take. The solution Oddr uses to recover his *godðorð* is to threaten Óspakr; while this works, it deprives him of an excellent manager and grants him an enemy. Oddr is not wise, and the saga emphasizes his flaws and strategical mistakes. This, nevertheless, proves there was room for diverse strategies of different quality in their outcome.

So far, Oddr shows many of the traits typical of Big Men; he is a self made-man with entrepreneur mentality, he helps those in need, accumulates and distributes resources, tries to lead a very impressive social life displaying himself and dealing with other important men, uses men to produce on his behalf while keeping them loyal with care for their situation, and so on. But the saga insists several times on the point of lineage and on the role of an institutionalized office which, if theoretically and economically accessible, seems to be less open in terms of practical competence: the legal activities associated with the ownership of a *godðorð*, and the economic resources needed to both obtain and maintain it. Both these points should be

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<sup>46</sup> This is a cause of distrust for Oddr, which extends to Óspakr's family. When he is introduced, Óspakr is said to be a related from her mother side to Grettir the outlaw, a paradigm of unsociability (Ba. 4:2).

analyzed, as the saga turns into them as centres of attention in its second half, where Oddr plays a more passive role, and his father Ófeigr becomes the leading character.

For all his economic success and careful usage of material means to build social ties, Oddr lacks legal knowledge, and from this flank is where the banded coalition of chieftains which name the saga will try to attack and overcome him. As we have seen, the manipulation of knowledge was also important for Big Men (Lindstrom 1984), as long as this was a knowledge that could be manipulated with some flexibility. Legal knowledge was indeed of such kind in Iceland, even if it was not totally flexible. Its essentially public and conflict-based nature also made its conversion into a source of prestige a relatively straightforward matter. We have no knowledge of when and where Ófeigr did learn about law, but years and years of participation (the saga insists on his old age) in the *þing* could have provided for a reasonable source of knowledge. Ófeigr is cunning, and satirizes the court system and how it could be persuaded with the help of material means. But while he uses his son's purse to achieve his means, he also needs a plus of knowledge and rhetoric to establish the proper situation in the court.

One of the arguments Ófeigr uses to persuade one of the opposing *goðar* is his good lineage (“We are not dissimilar, each of us two a man of a good family” *okker sé ekeki ólíkt farit, hvárrtveggi maðrinn attstórr*, Ba. 8:19). And through him, that membership into “good family” should also apply to his son, or it would have been senseless as a kinship-based argument. This is in contradiction with the typified Big Man, who is a self-made man.

In fact, the figure of Ófeigr is depicted as a knowing-the-ropes, seasoned man<sup>47</sup>, appearing from neglect to save the new-rich naive son. This might be seen as a comment to show the deficiencies of self-made-manship, and to positively assess the assets of lineage. Oddr surrenders to his help, and they reconcile with each other. The saga ending, after telling of the descendants of Oddr, remarks on the good family feeling ([with] *góðri frændsami*, BA. 12:36) between him and his father. The general message conveyed seems to be that while a man can build himself a position on his own, nobody can be good at everything, and that family ties are the most trustworthy ones to cover these faults. This particular ideology, which permeates the whole work, at the same time leaves room for Big Man-ship (and it will be hard to find a more stereotypical example than Oddr of the ambitious-and-generous quality expected in Big Men)

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<sup>47</sup> A figure rather uncommon for old people in Old Norse literature and in the whole Middle Ages in general, but which is nevertheless present (Ármann Jakobsson 2005:302-305). A good example of the ambiguity is present in *Hávamál*, even while it also insinuates old men could be laughable: “Never laugh at the gray-haired: is often good, what the old ones say” (*at három hlæðu aldregi! Opt er gott, þat er gamlir qveða*. *Hávamál*, stanza 134: 39)

but it also limits its pure applicability placing an emphasis on lineage. Accordingly, the inverse figure exists: men of bad family cannot become important even if they have some of the personal qualities of a man like Oddr, and this is what Óspakr happens to be.

Another clear limitation is that a *godðorð* was thought to be necessary to build a retinue of men and to become truly important. In fact, if “*þingmenn* quickly flocked to him; they were all eager towards him” (*Söfnuðusk bonum skjótt þingmenn; váru allir til hans fúsir*, Ba.2:3), they only do that –and legally they just then can do it- *after* he gets his institutional position. He had his household, but some of the man-fishing strategies fundamental to the expansion of Big Men are thus here shown to be limited by an institutional position, which nevertheless could be bought and/or (maybe) established, at least at the time when the saga is set. A limitation to the accessibility of a *godðorð* could thus severely limit the possibilities of becoming important, and is detrimental to the applicability of the idea of Big Man in such a context.

## 4.2 Arnkell goði

Arnkell Þórólfsson is one of the two main characters of the complex *Eyrbyggja saga*, the second case taken from the *Íslendingasögur* genre that we will discuss. This saga has been preserved in three relatively similar redactions, and was composed in the XIIIth century, but it is not clear in which particular period.

Þórólfr, Arnkell’s father, is an important character in the saga. He is said to have been a great viking (Ey. 8: 13). Arnkell’s grandmother, Geírridr, comes from an important lineage presented in the first chapter of the saga. She is described as very generous with food (*þar* [in her house] *stóð jafnan borð ok matr á, gefinn hverjum er hafa vildi; af slíku þótti hon it mesta gófugkvnni*, Ey.8:13). On the contrary, this did not apply to her son Þórólfr, who obtained a bigger farm dueling with an honourable man, Úlfr the warrior, because he was “old and childless” (*hann var við aldr ok barnlauss*, 8: 14). Úlfr had been given those lands by Geírridr, and this emphasizes the difference between mother and son. Þórólfr made money selling the lands he won through the duel, and was considered the unfairest of all men (*inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr*<sup>48</sup>, Ey. 8:14)

Arnkell is the only son of Þórólfr, who also had two daughters. He is presented (Ey.12: 20) as the strongest of men, able with law, intelligent (*forvitri*), courageous, honest, and popular.

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<sup>48</sup> On the precise meaning of this term, see Byock 2001: 190-192.

Later (Ey. 37: 99-100) we are also told he was hard working, and ordered his slaves to work hay-making from sunrise to sunset (*milli sólsetra*).

Arnkell is said to have been a *goði* with many *þingmenn*, but we are not informed about the origin of his *goðorð*. There is a hint about this in a comment made when his rival, Snorri, obtains his own *goðorð*. That generates discomfort “because there were many [men] that felt they did not think themselves inferior for the sake of their family rank, and had more means/power under their control, and proven valour” (*því at þeir vǫru margir, er eigi þóttusk til minna um komnir fyrir attar sakar, en áttu meira undir sér fyrir afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi*, Ey.15: 27). From this we can imagine that the important qualities to obtain (or create?) a *goðorð* were believed to have been some lineage, means (if *afls* is to be understood in that way<sup>49</sup>), and personal valour. It seems reasonable to assume these conditions also apply to Arnkell, and to establish a link between them and his possession of a *goðorð*.

Arnkell first enters into a struggle with Snorri to defend his sister against an accusation of witchcraft. The saga shows him to have no trouble in finding men to swear an oath of innocence on her behalf (Ey. 16:30), proving his influence. He later accepts to defend his kinsman, Þórarin, in a case of murder that will be again led by Snorri. His strategy is again to count on many men, and the saga informs he was very hospitable and of good mood, and thought badly if others were not as glad as himself (*Arnkell var hýbýlapróður ok gleðimaðr mikill, þótti honum ok illa, ef aðrir vǫru eigi jafnglaðir sem hann* Ey. 18:49); he has interest (in the literal sense of the word) in the well-being of others.

In the meantime, he gets rid of the witch who originally accused his sister using the strength of a gang of followers. But he carefully decides to avoid that path to defend Þórarin, because it would have been too expensive to pay all the compensations (Ey. 21:55). They decide instead to send him away from the country before the trial, but Snorri burns his ship. Arnkell intercedes and buys a new ship with his ally, a *goði*'s son named Vermundr. Arnkell grants his part to Þórarin. His material resources are sufficient and he manages them well, distributing them intelligently<sup>50</sup> and generously. This fact is publicly acknowledged as very praiseworthy, granting him fame (*lagðisk sá orðrómr á, at þessi liðveizla þatti in skörugligsta* Ey. 22: 57).

Arnkell is later shown going to a feast to the house of his ally, but carefully avoiding to take in charge some troublesome *berserkir* of Vermundr's retinue. Instead he persuades him to

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<sup>49</sup> It could also mean “supporters”, as in *mannafli*.

<sup>50</sup> In this case, he might have made an effort to pay the sum. But the stakes were high enough to justify it.



deliver them to Vermundr's brother Styrr, to both get rid of the problem and to rebuild a damaged relationship between the brothers. While with this Arnkell stabilizes his power and alliance with Vermundr, this enables the latter to force him to accept a case for murder against Snorri's faction. Arnkell knows this case could end badly (Ey. 27: 69), but he has no choice but to accept or lose his prestige, given the reciprocity expected in these dealings. He manages to succeed with a strong defence (*belt Arnkell fram þessum málum með mikilli freku*, Ey. 27:70), and obtains big compensations, thanks to the support of the powerful lineage of Kjallekings (Vermundr's family) to his case and to his own skill in the courts.

The aforementioned *berserkir* prove to bring a first defection from the Kjalleking side, as Vermundr's brother gets rid of them (and their aspirations to enter his family) through the clever (and ruthless) counsels of Snorri. Styrr then marries his daughter to Snorri, and both became allied and had many relatives and many followers inside the district (*váru þeir frændmargir ok fjölmennir innan heraðs*, Ey. 28:75), which are therefore lost to Arnkell's side.

A major conflict for Arnkell will come from his own family. His father bullies a good peasant, freedman Úlfarr, taking hay from him. Úlfarr, who might be thought of as Þórólfr's subordinate<sup>51</sup>, runs to Arnkell to ask for protection against the abuse. Arnkell then goes into protecting Úlfarr and quarrelling with his own father; his reputation is at stake. He fails to persuade Þórólfr to pay Úlfarr back for the hay. Arnkell takes instead oxen from his own father for a sacrifice. Þórólfr tries to take revenge sending his servants to burn Úlfarr, but Arnkell's men save him, and then he hangs the servants. It is here the first time a feast made by Arnkell is mentioned (even if we know they were usual<sup>52</sup>), and this shows material redistribution as a part of his strategy to produce and maintain his status. But the flow of goods now benefits Arnkell, as Úlfarr concedes him his property to obtain his protection (*handsalaði*. A footnote identifies it with the legal term *arfsal*. Ey. 31: 84 ). This leads the Þorbrandssons, Úlfarr's former owners (who had inheritance rights over him) to become

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<sup>51</sup> When he is introduced he is called a bóndi (*Þórólfr reið inn til Úlfarsfells at finna Úlfar bónda* Ey. 30:81). But Þórólfr calls him later a *þræll* (*Þórólfr kvað þræl þann helzti auðgan*. Ey 30:83). This is just a way to demean Úlfarr, and not an actual description of his status at the time, given that he manages a farm named after him. He is quite wealthy, and was already released from slavery. Nevertheless, it is clear that he has less status than Þórólfr, who never had been a slave before.

<sup>52</sup> It is made clear before Úlfarr is murdered: "The next autumn Arnkell made a big autumn feast, and as it was his custom, invited Úlfarr, his friend, to all feasts and sent him away always with gifts" (*þetta haust eftir hafði Arnkell inni haustboð mikít, en þat var vanði hans, at bjóða Úlfari, vin sínum, til allra boða ok leiða hann jafnan með gjofum út*. Ey. 32:87)

enemies of Arnkell; the growth of his power and resource base through manfishing sets at the same time the path for its narrowing<sup>53</sup>.

Þórólfr decides then to bribe<sup>54</sup> Snorri to help him in the case for the killing of Þórólfr's servants. Snorri manages to find legal reasons to deem the killing illegal; the judges of the case are Vermundr and Styrr. Now, with one on each faction, the outcome of the case is a fine for Arnkell, but which does not satisfy the greedy Þórólfr.

Then Úlfarr's brother dies, another freedman. He and Arnkell take the inheritance, but the former masters (the same of Úlfarr) claim it for themselves. Arnkell supports the freedman as expected. As the enmity created is bigger than the support Úlfarr can provide, the determinant reasons for this decision should be in the material gain, added to the prestige at stake in supporting a man who gave in *arfsal* all his property. But Þórólfr plans the death of Úlfarr, and sends a poor man to kill him when coming from a feast at Arnkell's farm (Ey. 32:88). Þórólfr then makes the former owners of Úlfarr capture his inheritance. But Arnkell's prestige and legal ability proves stronger, and they must resent the claim when he testifies the *bandsal* made on his behalf (Ey. 32:89).

The Þorbrandssons turn to Snorri, who declines their case about movable property. But he claims that Arnkell's acquisitive behaviour has been the norm, but that they might try to keep the lands. Even if it is unfair to him, Snorri refuses again to engage in an open struggle with the powerful Arnkell, for he "sits now over every man's part here in the district" (*sitr nú yfir þvers manns blut hér í héraði*, Ey. 32:90). At this point emerges a clear picture of Arnkell's strategy: he expands his power-base by acquiring material wealth through obtaining farms directly or indirectly, carefully distributing the revenues to his followers, and supplementing it with personal courage and legal abilities, enhanced by the prerogatives given in the court by his

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<sup>53</sup> Byock (1988:183-202. Republished in Byock 2001:99-117) provides a detailed analysis of this conflict. In his view, the expansion of Arnkell is basically *territorial*: he wants to acquire farmland. While this is hard to deny, we should add that controlling people ("manfishing") was at the same time of capital importance. This could explain for example what Arnkell gained in keeping Úlfarr on his side, especially if we take into account his abilities as a farmer and his riches. If we imagine Arnkell acting Big Man-like, he should be betting on the reciprocal help Úlfarr could provide besides the wealth he can directly transfer. On the other hand, Byock finds that "it is questionable what advantage Arnkell would have in seeing Úlfarr enjoy a long life" (Byock 1988: 192) and even suggests Arnkell could have been the original killer, and that the saga might be altered to show Arnkell under a too positive light (Byock 1988: 197, footnote 16). But is not only the chance to "recruit" Úlfarr what could help to explain Arnkell's protection of him. The *goði's* reputation is at stake, as we know it was expected (Ey. 31:85) from leaders (or potential leaders) to take action in this kind of situations. A too cautious *goði*, like Snorri, might be blamed for not doing so (Ey. 32:90); that the saga accepts its final victory does not mean he is seen as a model of virtuosity, a role that is placed on Arnkell.

<sup>54</sup> By offering Snorri control over a much-valued forest that he controls.

(apparently self-established) *godorð*. He resembles a Big Man, as his power is not based on inheritance (the contrast with his father is clear); but his lineage is good, which improves his chance to acquire the support of some people related him by kin. Yet, the need to keep his status also works against him, thus leading him into no-win situations, which alienate some supporters and turn them into enemies; these naturally tend to fall under Snorri's influence.

Þórólfr dies, and Arnkell inherits him. His ghost haunts the area, and Arnkell is forced to ask even his enemies (Úlfar's former masters) into helping him get rid of the problem, for the sake of common good. They accept, and the haunting ceases as long as Arnkell is alive.

In the meantime, Snorri keeps using the forest Þórólfr gave him, but Arnkell thinks he has rights of inheritance to it. Arnkell manages to make Snorri's servant attack him. Then he kills the servant, and takes the wood for himself. Both sides build big retinues for the court case, but Arnkell's legal ability prevails. But the results are not positive in the long run: his material needs have turned a previously careful Snorri into a full enemy.

Snorri attempts to kill Arnkell twice. The first time by sending a concealed minion (Ey. 36:97-98). Incited by mockery to his status in a feast, Snorri uses Úlfarr's former masters to watch Arnkell, and this second time his band murders him while he goes to collect hay. The saga blames a stereotypically stupid *þræll* (Ch. 37:101) for forgetting to call Arnkell's men to help him in the struggle. The whole episode is quite unrealistic, showing Arnkell under a light of perfection<sup>55</sup>. Yet, is ruthlessly realistic in showing that Big Man-like ambitions can be stopped by an equivalent (or nearly equivalent) force. Snorri's cold intelligence, the backing of his own group, and the calculation of no reprisal are enough to end Arnkell's rise to power. But Arnkell's alienation of men in search for resource control gives Snorri firm grounds to plan and execute his move.

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<sup>55</sup> The last paragraph about him has a very elegiac tone: “[His men]found Arkell, their bóndi, dead, and was this of all the men the most sorrowful death, because he had been the best of men in all things during the time of old customs, and the most intelligent of all men, of mild temperament, stout-hearted/generous and the boldest of men, reliable and always moderate; he always also had the right word in lawsuits, whoever the quarrel was with” (*ok fundu Arnkell, bónda sinn, dauðan, ok var hann öllum mönnum harmðauði, því at hann hefir verið allra manna bezt at sér um alla bluti í fornum síð ok manna vitrastr, vel skapi farinn, hjartaprúðr ok hverjum manni djarfari, einarðr ok allvel stilltr; hafði hann ok jafnan inn hæra blut í málaferlum, við hverja sem skipta var.* Ey. 37: 103). It is interesting to remark that the virtues upheld are all congruent with the role of a Big Man; Courage, moderation, knowledge and maybe generosity (if we give *hjartaprúðr* that reading. Both Cleasby-Vigfússon and Zöega suggest it. Fritzner proposes instead *modig* and *tapper*. ÍF suggests *djarfur*. The literal meaning points to choosing the common option “Stout-hearted”, but it will be somewhat redundant with *djarfari*, so maybe “generous” is intended).

### 4.3 Ögmundr Helgason

Ögmundr Helgason plays a prominent role in *Svínfellinga Saga*, one of the shortest stories in the Sturlunga compilation. Its scenario is the eastern quarter near the middle of the thirteenth century. Ögmundr comes from a well-off but non-aristocratic background: his father Digr-Helgi is a farmer, and his mother is also the daughter of a *bóndi* (Sv. 2:87). He is described (Sv. 10:98) as very strong, big, and taciturn; unlike other of the men we have analysed, he is never shown as rhetorically impressive at any point of the saga.

Ögmundr is married to a certain Steinunn of the Svínfellingar family, whose genealogy also extended to other dominant families of the era, like the Austfirðingar (on her father's side) and the Ásbirningar and Oddaverjar (from her mother's side)<sup>56</sup>. Her status is quite superior to his. Their family includes some very important men, like her brother, Brandr. He is first abbot, then acting bishop of Skálholt and finally bishop of Hólar. In fact, Ögmundr's father lived already in the ecclesiastic farm (*staðr*) at Kirkjubær as his son does, and this family has close ties with the Church, which he will use as one of the grounds for his attempt to ascend.

We have many hints on the way he accumulated material resources. He is said to have many children, and befriends a rich but non-prestigious farmer, Snorri sveim, and also another, named Egill. First he obtains property left by the dying and popular *goði* named Ormr<sup>57</sup>, Steinunn's brother. Then he manages it in the name of his youngest child, named Guðmundr, whom he fosters. After this he enters into a struggle for district mastery (*heraðstjórn*) with the older brother, Sæmundr, who manages the other part of the inheritance, which includes the *goðorð* (Sv. 3:89).

He then avoids to take in charge a supposedly poor man, and manoeuvres to have Sæmundr take care of him; this seems to contradict basic Big Man's "manfishing" logics. The saga might indicate that the man in fact had enough resources to support himself (Sv. 4:89), suggesting that Ögmundr should have been trying to burden and provoke Sæmundr and/or to capture those resources for himself.

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<sup>56</sup> The genealogical tree of her brother Brandr, showing the link with these families, has been constructed by Orri Véisteinsson (2000: 227).

<sup>57</sup> The saga says some men said he got sicker than he was after Ögmundr bled him (Sv. 3:88). It is unclear if this was just a mistake in an attempt to cure him, or a plan to accelerate his death.

In a scene easier to explain in terms of manfishing, he protects, provides for, and houses his friend Egill, who had been compelled into granting his property by Sæmundr, as Snorri sveim was. Ögmundr informs abbot Brandr about these incidents, who counsels them to avoid the conflict, but this advice is ignored. Ögmundr is said to be unyielding and “had a lot under himself” (*ótillátssamr ok átti mikit under sér*. Sv. 5:90), meaning he was influential.

Guðmundr grows and becomes close to Sæmundr, and wants to leave Ögmundr’s farm taking his property with him. Initially, he accepts the younger brother to leave without his property, but finally concedes both things. Ögmundr material needs are here shown to be for him of primary importance, even when the move is risky on strategical terms. From then on, his relationship with the brothers will be totally negative. Yet, Ögmundr retains influence over many men, and we are informed about the size of his direct (male) retinue: fifty freemen able to bear arms (*fimm tigr vígra karla*. Sv. 6:93). Moreover, near eighty men come to his help in the morning after an attack on him has been tried by the brothers’ faction (Sv. 6:93).

He seems to have different degrees of influence; directly over some close allies and household members, and indirectly over other men in the district, with corresponding degrees of loyalty, much in line with the Big-Man ideal type. This expanded influence explains his material ambition and shows one of the tensions implied by Big Man-ship in action. But what is interesting here is that he is not clashing against another upstart, but against a more stable kind of leadership represented by the *goðorð*-owner Sæmundr and his family, even while their actual number of followers is not that different<sup>58</sup>. It is interesting to note that when Ögmundr lets Guðmundr leave, he is advised to do so by his wife (Sv. 5:91), who came from the very prominent Svínfellingar family and was Guðmundr’s aunt. These kinship ties prove to turn the tide completely against Ögmundr. That happens when Þórðr Sighvatsson, a powerful great chieftain (*stórgoði*) whose niece is married to Sæmundr (Sv. 95), seems to support him in the court with a strong force (or at least keeps neutrality), and not Ögmundr, who also tried to get his support (Sv. 7: 94). Ögmundr is influential with the farmers<sup>59</sup>, who promise him to let him

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<sup>58</sup> Near eighty men (Sv. 6:91) accompany him in the frustrated attack against the fifty of Ögmundr, but if we add those that come later, we have one hundred and thirty on the latter’s side. We do not know those who could have defended Sæmundr in a similar situation, but at least it is clear that neither faction has overwhelming odds against the other in terms of brute strength.

<sup>59</sup> Þórðr confirms this in a speech to Ögmundr, while assuring him neutrality in the disputes: “Because you have more wealth. You are full-of-friends with the farmers. Even if you have no *goðorð*, I also hear that the farmers wish you no worse than to Sæmundr” (*Því at þú hefir fjárkost meira. Þú ert ok vinsælli af bóndum. Þótt þú hafir eigi goðorð, þá heyrir ek ok, at bandr vilji þér eigi verr en Sæmundi*. Sv. 6: 94)

use their property in the struggle (Sv.7:94). This maybe shows their reciprocity from previous help, but might also be derived from charismatic virtues, and/or it could be read as a form of collective action to try to stop the overbearing Sæmundr. But this support is not enough against the blood-and-alliance ties of established, aristocratic lineages.

The established, institutional leadership is put into action when Sæmundr forces his own *þingmenn* to swear allegiance to him (Sv. 6: 94) and therefore, to abandon Ögmundr. Using again the advantages of his position as a *goði*, Sæmundr manages to declare Ögmundr into full outlawry (*sekr*) and lawfully seizes a big part of his wealth (Sv. 8: 95) when abbot Brandr is out of the *þing*<sup>60</sup> and thus unable to protect the farmer. This suggests that Big Manship not backed by some stable power could not compete against another instituted power, especially an inherited one like the one held by Sæmundr<sup>61</sup>. The abbot comes back and manages to reconcile them (Sv. 9: 95-96), but Ögmundr lacks now material means, and his chances to achieve power are practically lost. He will kill the brothers in a vengeful and perplexing move, but does so accompanied with a significantly smaller force than before (his seven housecarls and five close allies. Sv: 10:98), a number better suited for the enacted ambush than for open battle. This does not lead him into achieving any position, and after paying the big fine<sup>62</sup> imposed on him by Brandr (Sv. 14: 103), he moves with his allies Snorri and Egill out of the area. He is said to be then poor ([Ögmundr] *hafði þá lítil efni*. Sv. 14:103).

We have particularly detailed information about the property owned by Ögmundr. Even after the Church property and the property of his wife were set apart, Sæmundr is able to expropriate him from a large amount of livestock, weapons, and some prestige goods (a bed, a horseload of clothing, and ten chests. Sv. 8:95). As Jón Jóhanesson pointed out (1974 : 289), this farm must have been exceptionally rich in terms of livestock. The presence of a stock of expensive, non-subsistence goods adds to this picture of abundance. Ögmundr seems to have based his influence over other men strongly on economic grounds<sup>63</sup>, much in line with the typical Big Man. Even if we do not see him feasting and gifting through the saga, his retinue is significantly smaller when he kills the brothers than when he defends himself against them:

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<sup>60</sup> His first attempt to do so was blocked by the abbot and the young Guðmundr (Sv. 90:5).

<sup>61</sup> A situation that contrasts with the non-inherited, self-established *godorð* obtained by our *Íslendingasögur* examples, Arnkell and Oddr.

<sup>62</sup> This is a relatively mild punishment, derived from the good relations between Brandr and Ögmundr.

<sup>63</sup> We see him commanding troops in *Dorgils saga skarða* (Po. 50:188) with Sturla Þórðarson, but this isolated episode seems not to add any substantial martial trait to the grounds of his power.

thirteen instead of fifty/one-hundred and thirty men. Moreover, he does not attend the *þing* when he is outlawed, while previously he attended with large groups.

His other asset, personal popularity with the farmers, is counterbalanced by the power of Sæmundr, and all they can offer Ögmundr after this is disposal of their wealth. This is pointless, because wealth itself is useless in Big Man logics if there are no followers that could be won by outdoing. But this proves this wealth was needed by Ögmundr, who lost his own. The scarcity is augmented with a harsh winter, which made “difficult to acquire both food and hay” (*bæði illt til matar ok heyja*. Sv. 9:97). In this dire situation, Ögmundr is not able to help those in need, a typical strategy to win or keep status. These are traces of the disastrous result to his power-base the losing of his wealth had on him. Ögmundr therefore seems to comply to the most basic trait of Big Men, political influence derived from material redistribution, grounded on extensive wealth. At the same time, the saga does not show many other traits common to Big Man, like good rhetoric or extensive knowledge. Even further, his power also seems to depend in part from some support from the Church, in the form of abbot Brandr; this is another important difference compared with the ideal, self-made Big Man.

Another interesting point is that the saga makes clear that, while there is room for Big-Man-like strategies in Sturlung-age Iceland, Big Men are no match for the stronger powers of established, territorial lineages beyond the short run. This is not (any more?) a “Big Man society”. But it is one that still had some room for manoeuvring of unimportant men into social, economic, and political climbing, and not (yet?) a purely aristocratic system.

#### 4.4 Kálfr Guttormsson

The career of Kálfr Guttormsson is mainly depicted in *Íslendinga Saga*, the longest individual saga in the Sturlunga compilation. It is mainly constituted from two episodes; first, his dealings with Hall Kleppjárnsson, and then his confrontation with Kolbeinn the young, which led to his execution. His ties with the powerful *goði* Sighvatr Sturlusson and with the Church and other farmers are also prominent. When compared to another *stórbóndi* like Ögmundr Helgason, it becomes evident that we know less about the material situation of Kálfr. On the other hand, we can grasp from the saga very interesting glimpses about his ideology, if we consider it a reliable source.

Kálfr is married to a certain Ósk, daughter of Þorvarðr the wealthy, and “was considered the most important farmer in Eyjafjörðr” (*Kálfr þótti þá mestr bóndi í Eyjafirði*, Ís. 28: 257)<sup>64</sup>. His opponent, Hallr, has far superior status. He is a goði, has “the biggest authority over men in Eyjafjörðr” (*manaforráð mest í Eyjafirði*, Ís. 28: 257) and is married to a daughter of the famous Guðmundr dýri. Kálfr was also related to Guðmundr, who arranged his marriage (*Guðmundar saga dýra*, 22:205) as Þorvarðr was his nephew. The presentation of Hallr and Kálfr is made in parallel, as to clearly mark the difference in power between both. Earlier in his life, Kálfr acted as a subordinate lieutenant of Guðmundr in his struggle for mastery in Eyjafjörður. From this position he obtained the important farm where he lived when Guðmundr retired to a monastery. Hallr seems to have taken the role of Guðmundr as the head of the area, but Kálfr did not keep his subordinate role and instead has personal ambitions.

Logically, Kálfr and Hallr distrust each other. Hallr tries to prevent his *þingmenn* from mingling with Kálfr. They clash about the rights over a beached whale, which was a very important source of unexpected extra resources. Both go to the *alþing* to settle the dispute, and are said to be the most eloquent men (*ok vár hvárr tveggja inn mesti flutningmaðr sins máls*, Ís. 28: 257). Hallr’s supporters mock Kálfr with poetry, attacking his pretension of *status*, to the point of comparing him with an animal<sup>65</sup>. One of the stanzas thrown at him deserves special comment:

Hefr of hrepp inn øfra – hann es görr at þrotsmanni,

þats kotmanna kynni- Kálfr matgjafir hálfar

[Kálfr gives, in the upper commune, only half the food-gifts; That is a feature of a cottager, He has become a pauper<sup>66</sup>. Ís. 28:258]

It is interesting to note that the accusations are of stinginess in distribution, which appear associated with the behaviour of powerless men, of men in need. In anthropological terms, the accusation is of being a *rubbish man*, the opposite to a Big Man; stingy, poor and socially worthless. As the context of the passage reveals, these accusations are unfounded and

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<sup>64</sup> He has just two children, few if compared to Ögmundur Helgason. This hints towards less labour from his own household to take advantage of, and less options for kinship-based strategies.

<sup>65</sup> His name, which means “calf”, was a particularly easy target for this kind of mockery.

<sup>66</sup> Our translation follows the Danish one by Finnur Jónsson (1912-1915: B2. 149): “Kalv giver, i den øvre rep, just halve madrationer, det er husmænds skik; han er gjort til en stodder”.



aggressive. Probably they hint the opposite, Kálfr's generosity with food and his high local status. More importantly, they also point towards Kálfr as having some control of the local commune (*breppr*), which probably served as a source of prestige, and could have been manipulated to some extent into obtaining material resources<sup>67</sup>. Even if "little is known about the actual functioning of this unit" (Byock 1986: 33), the control of it could have provided an important asset to obtain prestige and have political control over differential access to resources<sup>68</sup>, without the need of an extensive personal wealth (as a communal leader), and/or an institutional channel to turn personal wealth into prestige on a local level. Both cases provide an institutional framework, in this akin to the ceremonies like Moka or Potlatch, or to guilds, where a Big Man-like figure could display publicly his generosity and pose as a benefactor<sup>69</sup>.

Later, Kálfr kills Hallr accompanied by a small retinue recruited among his kinsmen. He had some support of his *godzi*, Sighvatr, but still shows some degree of independence, as the latter had a more cautious stance on this course of action. When he gathers people to defend against the retaliation, he groups his kinsmen, friends and more people (Ís. 29:259). This shows he was quite influential. It is also interesting to note that the farm where they defend is fortified (it is described as *virki*, "stronghold / castle". Ís. 29:259<sup>70</sup>), which might point towards a militaristic kind of leadership, which would be more akin to Godelier's Great Man than to a typical Big Man. After this, and thanks to the intervention of locals, he only gets district outlawry (*béraðseker*, Ís. 29:259) plus a big fine for the killing of Hallr. That is not a huge punishment considering his lesser power if compared to the prosecutors. He then goes into outlawry, and disappears from the scene for some time. He will buy himself a new farm in Miklabær in another district for the remaining part of his life (Ís. 32: 260), a recovery which hints towards his ability in household management.

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<sup>67</sup> The *breppr* seem to have become stronger as solidarity networks after the introduction of the Norwegian administration in the late XIIIth, as long as the conflict between competing chieftains did no longer play a role as a redistributive force (Jón Viðar Sigurdsson 2007: 178-180). It is tempting to see this process as earlier, and figures like Kálfr taking the leadership of communes once the remaining *godar* became bigger and less interested in local matters, yet more exactive.

<sup>68</sup> I take the expression from Wolf (1966:6). That article had been of some help to understand the social ties and logics in medieval Iceland, even if it was aimed to understand a rather different kind of society.

<sup>69</sup> Some authors (Stein-Wilkshuis 1982, Wieland & Pálsdóttir 1986) went as far as discussing the *breppr* as an early form of social welfare.

<sup>70</sup> This fort was won earlier by Kálfr when he was in the following of Guðmundr the worthy, and Kálfr kept control of it.

Kálfr, as other big farmers, does not get along well with Sighvatr goði, who moves into their area, and who they see as not having inherited his power. Nor, it seemed to them, did he have any *óðal* rights over the district (*Þótti þeim hann eiga þar hvárki i héraði erfðir né óðul*. Ís. 32:260). Ideologically, it seemed to the big farmers that some ways of acquiring property were therefore socially preferable and more legitimate than others. Both these methods are transferrals that are not employing contractual/mercantile logics, nor (surprisingly) the logics of gift-giving (reciprocity and/or redistribution). Both are ideas of transference of wealth closely associated with lineage and intergenerational transmission; neither is particularly fit for Big Men. While true allodial land (*óðul/óðal*) seems not to have existed in Iceland (Byock 1998: 99-101) the idea of it surely did and was well-known from its extension in Norway<sup>71</sup>. Moreover, there is surely some link between a certain family and the transferral of principal farms (*aðalból*), which point out towards an association between lineage and inheritance paralleling one between kin and landed property. The territorial (in both economic and political terms) expansion of late *goðar* like Sighvatr thus clashes with the ideology of farmers, who seem to have thought landed property aside from the games of exchange, redistribution and outdoing characterize *both* Chief-like and Big Man-like strategies.

Nevertheless, Sighvatr is then said to have come into better relations with them (we are not informed how, but feasting and helping those in need is a plausible explanation), the only exception being the descendants of Hallr. This proves the continuity of his uneasy relationship with Kálfr.

Kálfr then remains calm until another ambitious *goði* appears in the area. He gets in an alliance with another *stórbóndi* to win farmers away from that *goði*, Kolbeinn the young (Ís. 95: 367), while keeping on good terms with Kolbeinn's rival (and their friend/patron) Sighvatr. Threatened by Kolbeinn, Kálfr rejects an accusation of plotting against him. Nevertheless, he resists to help Kolbeinn and his ally Óraekja Snorrason against Sighvatr, while other *stórboendr* do. Frustrated their plan, they turn against Kálfr, who declares himself to be a *þingmaðr* of St.Peter (Ís. 101:369), an ambiguous statement<sup>72</sup> about his link with *goðar*; both the threatening,

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<sup>71</sup> For example, it was one of the elements in the recurring explanation medieval Icelanders gave to the reasons for the settlement of the country, that Harald fairhair expropriated all the lands of the farmers declaring the whole country his *óðal* (See Krag 1989). *Óðal* is of debated origin and antiquity. It is already attested in 1037 with certainty, but could be much older, and related ideas are attested in Viking-Age runic inscriptions (See Christiansen 2006: 48-61)

<sup>72</sup> It is not clear if that is just a way to refer to his own forecoming death, or if it involves some criticism to the *goðar*. It might express the wish to enter a monastery and leave secular life as Guðmundr dýri did.

aggressive Kolbeinn and the passive Sighvatr do him no good. Expectably, Kolbeinn's men kill him, as he seems then to lack any higher institutional support, in a situation akin to that of Ögmundur Helgason.

His death stems from trying to resist a too powerful enemy and keep certain independence of action, and not from any revenge (i.e. from Hallr's family). Yet, the saga notes how his fame outlived him: "And this was the speech of men, that Kálfr Guttormsson had been the best of farmers in northern Iceland [during the time], when he was alive" (*Ok er þat mál manna, at Kálfr Guttormsson hafi mestr bóndi verit fyrir norðan land þann tíma, er hann var uppi.* Ís96 : 370).

Kálfr, like Ögmundur, had ties with the Church. He is said to be an acolyte and his son a deacon (Ís. 96: 369). Yet, these links seem not to have been too close nor useful. In fact, we lack in the saga enough hints about the grounds for his power<sup>73</sup>. He seems not to be particularly resourceful, nor is there any clear indication of him using wealth to build a retinue, like Ögmundur, Oddr and Arnkell did. Besides some martial aspect<sup>74</sup>, the main root for his power seems to have stemmed from his charisma<sup>75</sup> and good rhetoric.

Kálfr has some of the aspects of a Big Man, and his saga is inconclusive about others. He seems to be taking less risks with wealth than Ögmundur did, as he is never expropriated nor described as lacking means in any moment<sup>76</sup>. Here the (uneasy) support of Sighvatr might have been determinant. In fact, it seems clear that the plan of Kolbeinn and Óraekja is to deprive him of the middle chain of his base of power, big farmers like Kálfr. The power of Kolbeinn and Óraekja is no match for Sighvatr, and this results in the death of Kálfr. Not much of this is consistent with Big Man status, and some traits are contradictory. Even if not happy about it, Kálfr seems to have been part of a bigger, territorial power which had him (and not only him) as part of his structure, with smaller farmers under him, and Sighvatr at the top. He might have been in a similar situation under Guðmundr dýri earlier in his life. Of course, he displays

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<sup>73</sup> This scarcity of information is tempered if we add the information on him present in the last part of *Guðmundar saga dýra*.

<sup>74</sup> Which might have been one of the reasons for some pending retributions against him we do not know. When Kolbeinn and his men come to find him, Kálfr asks (Ís. 96:369) if that (armed) group has associations with Kleppjárn Hallsson (who has good reasons to want revenge for his father's killer) and a certain Styrmir Grímsson, (of unclear identity) and why will he have a revenge to exert on Kálfr. The only certain thing here is that Kálfr had more than one pending problem with men. If his methods against rivals were always as violent as they were against Hallr, his position was quite dangerous.

<sup>75</sup> This picture is consistent with his description in *Guðmundar saga dýra* (16:194). In a scene where two men assess who is the best of men, someone mentions him and says that nobody was equally courteous (*jafnkeurteis*) and the most impressive man (*vasker at sér*), which points towards manliness and ability as warrior. He had been abroad seemingly with success, a fact which further enhanced his prestige.

<sup>76</sup> As Ögmundur was. See p. 28 above.

independence and keeps an ambiguous stance on his relationships with the *godar* with his declaration of being in þing with a Saint. These elements moderate the sentence on his social place; if not a classical Big Man, Kálfr is not either a functionary.

#### 4.5 Sturla Þórðarson

Our last case under scrutiny, Sturla Þórðarson differs from the others substantially, as he plays significant roles in other secular contemporary sagas besides *Þorgils saga skarða*, which is the one we analyse. Moreover, he is not even the main character in that saga, a role expectably played by Þorgils skarði, who is another of the Sturlungar. The choice is grounded on the approach the saga has towards him, different from the one that others sagas of the compilation have. Those others are quite partial towards him, as could be expected from writings that probably come from his own authorship, like *Íslendinga Saga*<sup>77</sup>. The saga is set in the middle of the thirteenth century, close to the main events in *Svínfellinga Saga*.

His father was the brother of Snorri Sturluson, and Sturla was brought up by him<sup>78</sup> for some time, and the uncle of the powerful Sturla Sigvhatsson, both major players in the conflicts on the later years of the commonwealth. His mother, Þóra, was not the legitimate wife of Þórðr Sturluson but a mistress (*frilla*). Þórðr and his second wife had a legitimate child, Böðvarr, who was the father of Þorgils skarði.

Sturla's first appearance<sup>79</sup> in the narrative is when he is said to have united by oaths, friendship and kinship to Þórðr kakali, who had disposed of the goods belonging to the then executed Snorri Sturluson. This makes him enter into conflict with Þorgils, who (as a retainer of the king) was ordered to dispose of those goods himself. He and the other men in his faction promise to oppose Gizurr Þorvaldsson, a major representative of the king in Iceland, if he wanted to assume control of the nation (*þeir skyldi halda ríkjum fyrir honum*, Þo. 11:119). This is a tense point, where less powerful men (like Sturla) have to choose between the risk of becoming subordinate and powerless, or to risk opposing a king who has many agents, even if

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<sup>77</sup> Preserved in only one of the two vellum manuscripts of the Sturlunga compilation, it is possible that *Þorgils saga skarða* was written while Sturla was still alive (before 1284) and he had knowledge of it before writing his part of Sturlunga, or it could have been written after his death. Yet, there is consensus he was not the author, and we can from this consider it a less unreliable source to follow his career.

<sup>78</sup> This might have been influential for the powerful rhetoric ability and knowledge Sturla displays.

<sup>79</sup> Sturla is mentioned for the first time in the saga composing a poem on Þorgils, praising his courage (Þo. 6: 113-114)

these not necessarily constitute a monolithic faction, by trying the risky course of keeping a local power base for themselves. Sturla seems to have discovered this, and knew that Eyjólfur, another of Þórðr's allies/subordinates will be on a different side of his in the imminent dispute between Þórðr and Þorgils, as he tells a farmer (Þo. 12: 119:120).

This political movement is expressed using a dream, which he communicates to a local farmer (and a cousin of Þorgils) after feasting at Eyjólfur's farm, while at the same occasion he does not miss the opportunity to criticize the feast, thus remarking his rejection of the tie with him. His intentions were obviously to side with Þorgils against Þórðr's side. The usage of visionary dreams is a tool to which *Big Men* are known to resort, as long as it is culturally available (Lindstrom 1984: 300-301. In this line, Helgi Þorláksson 1991b), a fact which is proved by the large amount and significance of visionary dreams depicted in medieval Icelandic sources (See Turville-Petre 1958, Miller 1986b.). On the same line, Sturla predicts the death of Helgi, an unimportant man<sup>80</sup> (Þo. 41: 168), in a scene loosely connected with the main narrative.

When Þorgils arrives, and reclaims the lands which belonged to Snorri for the king, the local farmers resist, and refuse until Hrafn (another of Þórðr's "allies") and Sturla were present (Þo. 13: 121) which reveals at the same time the influence they had over the farmers and how the farmers discharged in them this kind of potentially dangerous decisions. Þorgils is nevertheless granted the farm at Reykholt, and starts living there with big expense, and exacting a "sheep tax" (*sauðakvöð*, Þo. 14:122) from the locals<sup>81</sup>. The farmers keep resisting him, and reject to sell him supplies. He resorts to violence and bullying and this softens their resistance. He also met Gizurr, and both get along well, showing their loyalty to the king goes beyond their own ambitions (or political possibilities).

Later Sturla tries to persuade Þorgils to leave the king, who in turn tries to persuade the former to leave two of his allies, Hrafn and Eyjólf, who also were oath-bound to Þórðr. Both fail, and the meeting is described as unfriendly; but this means more a lack of alliance than actual hostility, as there is no sign of aggression here. The impression of ambiguity in Sturla's

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<sup>80</sup> That Helgi is the foster-son of Sturla. This suggests he collects impoverished man in his household, as Big Men do.

<sup>81</sup> This exaction of taxes is not even masked under reciprocity ideology (like the logic of protection of promises of salvation) . This shows how far are major leaders of late-commonwealth Iceland from the type of Big Man.

behaviour is confirmed by a letter sent by the bishop of Hólar to Þorgils, where he warns “Sturla was less a friend to him than he should be” (*Sturla minni vinr en vera skyldi*, Þo. 15: 372).

But then Sturla meets his ally Hrafn, and they make public that they want to meet Þorgils and be on friendly terms with him, giving a meeting proposal to Þorgils that is very detailed and wary but non-aggressive. It seems that Sturla tries to keep peace and a position for him and the middle-rank farmers in the area without risking open enmity with the power elite. As Big Men do, his path is to try to league with men of his rank, and through persuasion incite action for the general welfare (in this case, to keep peace and stability). What complicates the situation here is the historical situation of an actual title-holding power, which is absent in the theoretical Big Man typology, which also tended to overlook inquiries into the relationship between, say, Melanesian Big Men and the colonial State power. But here (nor in the other two Sturlunga cases) we are in this ideal situation, but in a context where there exists an established elite whose strength does not come (at least mainly) from a combination of redistribution and charisma, but which is (still) not able to turn the middle ranks of farmers into a servicial, dependant group.

Þorgils accepts the aforementioned proposal and rides to the meeting with Sturla and his allies, influential local farmers like him. Both sides go with just fifteen men, and this is meaningful: no faction risks being inferior nor superior to the other. A fiction of equality is enacted, but while one side is presented as Þorgils and fourteen other, the other is composed of Sturla, Hrafn, Nikulás and Kolbeinn plus another eleven. While numerically equal, leadership is clearly different. Sturla’s action during the meeting is to talk with Þorgils’ cousin, and to ask him on his loyalty to the king, and his relationship with Gizurr. The answer is quite straightforward: Þorgils is loyal to the king, but not directly to Gizurr, and to try to move him away from the king is a waste of time. And it is followed by a counsel, “it would be more fitting for you to uphold friendship and fellowship with your kinsman Þorgils than to pledge yourself to allegiance with those men who are not his friends” (*þér samði eigi verr at halda vináttu ok félagsskap við Þorgils, frænda þinn, en bindast í trúnaði við þá men, sem eigi eru vinir hans*, Þo. 15: 372). In other words, he should choose between political and kinship ties, but also between independence and subordination. Sturla answer points towards independence, as he accuses Þorgils of being unfriendly and violent to him in the previous meeting. As we have seen, there was no clear sign of violence in the description of that meeting, and it could perfectly be that Sturla is simply exaggerating in order to support his answer.

In the meantime, the others get into a discussion about Snorri's legacy, and both sides threaten each other: Hrafn predicts Þorgils doom for being at Gizurr's side, and the more pragmatic Þorgils warns the farmers not to steal what he deems his property. Nikúlas answers he will not concede, unless Þórðr comes. There is here a clash not only in terms of power, but also in terms of legitimacy, on who has the ultimate right to dispose of Snorri's property, either Þórðr or the king. Sturla sides with the other farmers promising support for Nikúlas, stubbornly rejecting all approaches by Þorgils. They slowly slide into more aggressive actions, and finally decide to menace him, and try to force him to choose to abandon his cause and join them against Gizurr, or to kill him (Þo. 18: 136). His men urge Þorgils to accept, and point out that he shares with them the kinship obligation to avenge Snorri Sturluson and other Sturlungar that Gizurr killed. Sturla tries to mediate in the negotiation, using a mixture of persuasion and duress. Their aim is not only to gain an ally against Gizurr, but to get rid of the dominant position of Þorgils, who they pretend to put on equal terms with them. They finally succeed, with Sturla and Hrafn playing a leading role; Sturla's rethorical and bargaining abilities are shown as particularly good, even if they are not praised by the narrator.

Þorgils, of course, is not bound by any reason to respect the agreement, and chooses to simply ignore it: the lack of any executive power in the hands of the farmers side to enforce the agreements on an reticent side are a weakness Þorgils has no fear of exploiting. Coordinated Big Man strategies might work with equal or lesser men, but are pointless against those who are not worried by social sanction, because is not where their status is derived from.

Moreover, the situation of Sturla is worsened when the bishop declares him and Hrafn to be traitors (*landráðarmenn*, Þo. 19: 138) and puts them under interdict, siding explicitly with Þorgils and praising him strongly (*Biskup talaði jafnan um þat, hversu vel bonum þótti orðit, er þeir höfðu eigi nátt Þorgils, ok þakkar guði þat*, Þó. 21:141). As a consequence, Sturla is blamed by part of his group, Hrafn included (Þo. 20:140), showing the personal (and therefore unstable) quality of his influence and alliances. But a little later we are informed that Hrafn feasted with Sturla at some of his farms (Þo. 20:141), which testifies the continuity of their alliance. We can also see that their influence remains strong in the local milieu; they are able to send spies, collect near thirty men in their retinue (*nær þrír tigir manna*, Þo: 20:141)<sup>82</sup>, and they are said to be

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<sup>82</sup> They are said to plan coming with three hundred to the Hólar area (*Hrafn ok Sürrla myndi koma vestan í Langadal at dróttinsdagsbelginni við þrjú hundruð manna*. Þo. 21: 142). These numbers are congruent with those manageable by Big Men, and not dissimilar to the sizes mentioned for the previous cases.

welcomed on very friendly terms by the farmer Egill in Reykholt (*Tók Egill bóndi við þeim báðum böndum* Þo. 20: 141), which was one of the main centres in dispute.

Both sides continue gathering forces. With this possibly in mind, and trying to avoid an escalation of the conflict, the bishop now “wanted to effect a reconciliation between them - Hrafn, Þorgils and Sturla-, and many [men] supported this” (*Vildi hann þá leita um sættir meðal þeira Hrafnis ok Sturlu ok Þorgils, ok stóðu margir undir þat*. Þo. 21: 143). Emissaries are sent to Hrafn and Sturla; it is interesting to remark that while Hrafn thinks all of these efforts to be lies, Sturla trusts them claiming knowledge of the nature of Þorgils. That he proves to be right enhances his prestige as an intelligent and wise man. In the meeting they reach no agreement, as they will not concede territories to Þorgils because they wanted not the royal order (*konungsskipan*, Þo. 23: 145) governing their district. Beyond the practical reasons (like avoiding taxes, etc.) it is important to remark they answer in ideological terms; their rejection is presented as aimed at the king itself, not at the practical effects of kingship.

Þorgils tries to reach a reconciliation with Sturla, whom “Þorgils found eager to accept the settlement, but on the other hand said that he seemed to be lacking wealth for big compensations” (*ok fannst Þorgils at Sturla væri sáttojarmligr, en talði þat upp í annan stað, at hann þóttist vera mjök févani til stórra gjalda*, Þo. 29: 402)<sup>83</sup>. This implies leaving his alliance with Hrafn, who is on far worse terms with Þorgils. Sturla evaluates between two options; to look for a third party to settle the claims for compensation in encircling and forcing Þorgils, or to grant him self-judgment, on the hope that this generous gesture will result in a counter-gift of generous concession and the building of friendship ties between both. Sturla makes it explicit that he knows well both terminologies, the one of law and the other of reciprocity, and this points toward his skill at managing relationships with other men in the most beneficial way, a crucial point for any Big Man figure.

He chooses the second, and the result is indeed very favourable. Þorgils quickly cancels the fine he himself asked on the judgement avoiding to pay the sum. This aims to establish between them excellent relationship based on kinship (*mikla frændsemi*, Þo. 31:159). Þorgils also emphasizes their kinship ties, but mentions Sturla's financial difficulties while doing so (*Veit ek ok gerla féskort þinn*, Þo. 31:159). They also swear each other oaths of mutual support. Sturla acts

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<sup>83</sup> There is no direct indication that there is a link between this move, which is a surrendering of his attempts at being a leader on his own and his financial difficulties. But it is totally expectable in theoretical terms, as poor Big Men lose one of their most important assets, the ability to redistribute.



not only on his behalf, but also on behalf of those men who were with him in the situation, showing he still held some authority over them.

Surprisingly, Hrafn travels with Sturla to the wedding of Sturla's daughter (Þo. 32:160). This might be a sign of acceptance of defeat by Hrafn. The role of Sturla in this is not clear, but immediately after this he gets reconciled with Þorgils, who applies strong fines on Hrafn. His relationship with Hrafn keeps on peaceful terms, but it seems that Sturla leans towards Þorgils. The relationship between them is described as more or less egalitarian, or at least not of pure subordination: for example, "Þorgils brought the matter<sup>84</sup> before Sturla and before other friends of his" (*Þorgils bar þetta mat fyrir Sturlu ok fyrir aðra vini sína*, Þo. 39:165), "Þorgils and Sturla then went to talk, and some other men [went] with them" (*Þeir Þorgils ok Sturla gengu þá á tal ok nökkurir menn með þeim*, Þo. 42:168), "Þorgils, Þorvarðr and Sturla now took council together" (*Nú gerðu þeir Þorgils ok Þorvarðr ok Sturla ráð sitt*, Þo. 46:179). The saga displays Sturla's rhetoric recurrently during the conflicts and mediations between men, and he provides persuasive advice very frequently, but never in the form of orders. Moreover, his ability as an orator is also important for his own retinue (*Nú talaði hvárr tveggja fyrir sínum mönnum, Sturla ok Þorgils – báðu þá vakra at vera, hvers sem við þyrfti, ok halda sér uppi vel*, Þo. 47:183)<sup>85</sup>.

Nevertheless the situation is quite unstable, as Hrafn relationship with Þorgils' faction is uneasy, and finally they decide to attack him, as all attempts to mediate fail. In the battle at Þveráreyrar in 1255 our attention is drawn to Sturla's success as a commander<sup>86</sup>. He is said to be one of those who fought superbly while fighting from a difficult position (Þo. 51:188-189)<sup>87</sup>.

After the battle Sturla displays once again his will to keep independence for himself and the local farmers. Þorgils makes a case for himself as the chieftain on lineage grounds, asking the farmers to support him. A farmer named Broddi answers that if he had to serve a chieftain, he would prefer Þorgils, but that it would be best to serve none at all. Sturla intervenes and strongly supports Broddi (*Sturla flutti þetta mest manna ok Ásbjörn*, Þo. 54:193)<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> The request is a plea for support by a distant relative of Þorgils.

<sup>85</sup> There is also some evidence that he also built on more material grounds, as we can deduce from the argument Ingimundr, a farmer, uses to reject a plea to oppose Sturla: "I have spent this winter with Sturla, and I have liked him greatly" (*Hefi ek veri með Sturlu í vetr, ok hefir mér vel til hans líkat*, Þo.48:183)

<sup>86</sup> Together with Ögmundr Helgasson. See footnote 63.

<sup>87</sup> There is more hinted about his martial knowledge when he dismisses a counter-attack by Hrafn on the clever grounds that he will not risk it after having been inferior in the previous one (Þo. 54:195)

<sup>88</sup> In addition, Þorgils and his allies get an excommunication. While they ignore it, this complicates their ambitions; Bishop Heinrekr of Hólar plays for the farmers side. In this context it is understandable why Sturla

Later, when Þorgils insists on making local farmers (in a different area) accept him, Sturla this time says no word but Broddi supports Þorgils, after talking extensively with Sturla. We can infer Sturla had persuaded Broddi to choose the lesser of evils: Sturla is realistic and right once again. The local farmers accept Þorgils, and they pay him the sheep tax without heavy complaints, a measure that is even suggested by Broddi (*Gerði Broddi þat ráð fyrir at hafa sauðakvöð*, Þo. 55:196).

A conflict between Þorgils and Bishop Heinrekr might explain why Sturla ambitions reappear. He reconciles with Hrafn, and they agree that they “will keep their districts and dominion without travelling abroad [to Norway]” (*Skyldi hvárir tveggja halda heruðum sínum ok ríkjum útanferðalaust*, Þo. 59:202 ), and they offer Þorgils the possibility of accepting this. The aim is to negotiate with him a recognition of his now established leadership for the cancellation of his expansionist plans. Given the ongoing conflict with the bishop, Þorgils accepts. Sturla’s political ability granted him another success. This leads to a reconciliation between the bishop and Þorgils, who brings back the situation to a *status quo*.

If this seems to be a total victory for Sturla, Hrafn and other prominent farmers, the main problem to stop Þorgils is that he has material means superior to them. Þorgils can also play potlatch-logics, and does so. He quickly moves into feasting and gift giving. Consequently it is said that “from these feasts, Þorgils won great esteem from the bóndis” (*Af þessari veizlu fékk Þorgils mikla virðing af bóndum*, Þo. 62:207), which in turn invite him to feast in their own farms. Given he is also collecting taxes from them, he obtains more than he gives materially, while politically acts to ensure local peace and goodwill, and succeeds excellently. He is celebrated as an excellent chieftain, according to the saga.

On the other hand, Sturla seems not to have been so plentiful. The saga hints that he has a hard time to obtain resources from his own area: “He had what [land and followers] he could get from the district” (*Hafði hann þat af heraði, sem hann fékk*. Þo. 64:207). Probably this is what leads to disagreements with Hrafn. Sturla’s political brilliance cannot overcome his economic situation, and in this he seems to show that he lacks the most prominent trait of Big Men, the presence of resources to redistribute and generate loyalty, who must come not only from those exacted on smaller men, but also from his own household(s). Then, Hrafn attacks his farm and kills one of his men; both compete at the same level.

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rejects spending the summer with Þorgils and moves instead to one of his own farms (Þo. 54:195). As a clever politician (or Big Man), he dares not risk being on the loser’s side, knowing his reputation will suffer.

The contrast between Sturla and Þorgils is remarked by the saga: the latter keeps expanding his property, while Sturla seems to be in trouble to make men follow him to the þing, even if his charisma seems to work as well as usual (Þo. 67:210). His conflict with Hrafn keeps going, and Sturla looks for the solution in a more powerful man<sup>89</sup>, and this leads him to Þorgils, and to submission. Local farmers refuse to help him, nor attack him<sup>90</sup>. Þorgils good and steady income grants him a power that neither Sturla nor Hrafn can match. Sturla knows this. Given the past situations and the blood ties, it is no surprise that Þorgils supports his kinsman over Hrafn, who offers a reconciliation. Sturla's subordination is shown while he declares that Þorgils must decide about it (*en þó mun Þorgils ráða*, Þo. 70: 214).

This situation remains until Þorgils is killed by an ambitious upstart. Sturla will not attempt to regain power for himself, but will try to avenge him. For this, he pledges loyalty to Gizurr, now Jarl of Iceland. His position is now even more subordinate (Þo. 78:323). He will even travel to the court in Norway (Þo. 81:226), his ambitions of personal independent power definitely ended<sup>91</sup>.

Sturla's career is a complex one, and as we have seen his most prominent abilities lie in his personal qualities. He is a politician and an orator, a man of knowledge and a poet, all complementary traits. He is not rich enough, and finally this proves to be the structural situation which puts him under men who, if maybe not as intelligent as him, combine more wealth with power not derived from personal qualities but from kingship. Sturla is pragmatic enough to hold on when it seems too risky, and he does not take unnecessary actions.

Besides his (relative) material scarcity, what goes against Sturla into becoming a Big Man in a more complete sense is the context. Unlike Arnkell goði or Oddr Ófeigsson, the political game in Iceland at his time far exceeded the possibilities of men like him. Other than his personal qualities and some land, Sturla could claim to possess membership in the Sturlungar as another important asset of his own. But, born out of wedlock, his inheritance was crippled. This placed him a step below true aristocracy and also hampered his initial material resources.

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<sup>89</sup> "Sturla wanted Þorgils to come to meet him so that one way or another they could settle the quarrel" (*Vildi Sturla, at Þorgils kæmi til móts við hann ok skærist ór á einhvern veg með þeim*, Þo. 68:212)

<sup>90</sup> One of them decides not to move unless Þorgils orders it (Þo. 68: 212), even if he shows sympathy towards Sturla.

<sup>91</sup> *Sturlu þáttr* informs about Sturla's later life, dominated by his subordination to the monarchs.

He is forced by this context into a nearly constant defensive position, trying to resist the advance of formal authority. He always manages to make the best of any situation, but his room for manoeuvring himself into positions of power turns out to be smaller each time.

As Godelier recurrently insists, Big Men could not be understood out of context. While some of the structures (that we described in the third chapter) that enabled Big Man-like action were still in place, they are also available to men who wield and exercise a power *more* than personal. Þorgils can feast and give gifts like a Big Man, but has pluses not available to even the most prosperous farmer; typologically, he is more akin to a Chief. The rise of these kind of figures necessarily implies the structural decline of men like Sturla, Ögmundur, or Kálfr. At the stage Sturla tried, it was simply too late and his career illustrates this impossibility.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Some remarks about the cases, and a hypothesis.

If we reread the list of traits associated with the ideal Big Men that we described in the second chapter under the light of these five cases, it will be made clear that most of these traits (and especially the most fundamental ones) appear in at least one of the cases. Some others, like the use of Big Men of female inside-household labour<sup>92</sup>, are predictably absent given the nature of the sources we used, which do not centre their attention in in-house matters but in “public”, political action, but are not contradictory with them either.

The traits present differ for each individual case. For example, Oddr’s main resources are economic (in the substantivist sense of the word) and he resembles the more immediate image of a Big Man, while Sturla is on opposite extreme of the type, as he relies mostly on charisma and intelligence, being akin to the kind of knowledge-based Big Man described by Lindstrom. In all cases, the power is basically personal, but there is some level of institutional influence: Arnkell and Oddr are *goðar* (of the early type as opposed to the late, Chief-like *stórgoðar*) and Sturla is akin to a late specimen of this type of early *goði*<sup>93</sup>. The other two cases, Kálfr and

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<sup>92</sup> Female labour was especially important in the production of textiles, and appears in many sources (A useful survey is Damsholt 1984). Surprisingly, this link between women and textile production is absent in a well-known book on women in old Norse society, which nevertheless has a full section on the “daily life and work” of Norse goddesses (Jochens 1996: 68-72)

<sup>93</sup> His final rise in *status* will come from his association with the monarchy.

Ögmundr, do not hold a *gøðorð*, but have some form of institutional backing due to their closeness to the Church.

Another important trait in two cases (Arnkell and Kálfr, maybe with minor overtones for Sturla and Ögmundr) is martial ability. In this they might be closer to Godelier's *Great Man*. As we noted<sup>94</sup>, Godelier added that in Big Man societies, the path to power through martial or sacred attributions is still open, but is inferior to the path of accumulation/redistribution. For medieval Iceland, this seems to be true for martial virtue, which is still never enough to achieve strong political power. The contrast between Snorri goði and Arnkell goði could be read as an illustration of this. The place of holiness as a path to power is more complicated to assess, partly because "there was a strong tie between the secular and religious leaders" (Jón Víðar Sigurðsson 2009: 63), so their behaviour was far from opposite in power struggles. The prestige of Icelandic Churchmen was also derived from quite secular matters, and could have been divorced from any *comptemptus mundi* or spiritual purity. But this is beyond the aim of this work. Nevertheless, it is clear that both holiness and martial prowess could have been important paths to prestige and power, but not fundamental enough to stop considering Big-Man like logics a dominant form of secular power-building in the early period, as both Arnkell and Oddr illustrate.

On the other hand, during the late-commonwealth the main figures of power are more akin to ethnographic Chiefs or medieval aristocrats. In that context, Big-Man like figures could still exist under their shadow, incorporated in the grasp these chiefs have of territorial dominions (as Sturla illustrates) or risk being destroyed by these same figures (as the cases of Kálfr and Ögmundr testify).

But there is a bigger limitation to consider all these figures as pure Big Men. In all cases, lineage plays a significant role in the process of power-building and negotiation these men illustrate. All come from at least somewhat important, "good" families either from maternal or paternal side. Our hypothesis is that this is a *necessary* condition<sup>95</sup> for trying with some success to build power, and is the main limit to the applicability of a pure Big Man type to medieval Iceland. Historically, it is easy to imagine how this link between lineage and power could have

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<sup>94</sup> See page 12 above

<sup>95</sup> But not a *sufficient* condition like in purely aristocratic societies, where family background itself grants some power and political capacity.

become present in Iceland, because it already existed<sup>96</sup> in viking-age Norway and the British archipelago, the main areas from where the original settlers came. If Icelandic society “de-evolved”, simplifying its social structures (See Byock 2001: 63-80), it seems that the ideology of lineage never faded away completely. To contrast this idea, we will briefly analyse the cases of three upstart men who attempt to build power without any kind of lineage; Hænsa-Þórir from *Hænsa-Þóris saga*, Þórhallr ölkofri from *Ölkoфра þáttur*, and Auðunn from *Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka*. This choice ranges from a miserable, pathetic character to a lucky, gifted man, through a more neutral figure; in any case, if lineage is, as we hypothesize, determinant over personal qualities, the outcome of their careers should be somewhat uniform beyond their personality.

## 5.2 Hænsa-Þórir <sup>97</sup>

Hænsa-Þóris saga tale is a short saga about a man who enriches himself buying and selling poultry in different parts of the country, and is then driven into a conflict with a *goði*, whom he refuses to sell hay in a time of need. That *goði* is acting like a Big Man, redistributing to smaller farmers in need, as to ensure an ongoing loyalty that grants him the ability to extract surplus from them in the long run aided by the ideology of reciprocity.

Unless we see Þórir’s decision purely on moral grounds (“Þórir is an evil man” or the like), it could be argued that this constitutes a form of bargain between both parts, to typify the kind of exchange logics to be used (Miller 1986, esp. 35-42). The social standing and kind of relationship between both goes in parallel with the form of exchange used, and the refusal of Þórir could be read as an attempt to compete with the *goði* and weaken his power-base. Þórir tries but fails to establish the same kind of relationship with smaller, poorer men, and he is instead seen as oppressive and unpopular. His contractual mentality (expressed by his tendency to typify exactly the conditions of agreements, and the give-and-take immediatism of his

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<sup>96</sup> Christiansen (2006:60) puts it clearly: “Status was transmitted through families, here as elsewhere”. In the same paragraph he expresses insecurity on nobility as transferable. But when discussing who are the Chiefs and magnates who “set up kings, by violence or peacefully, and supported them as long as rewards lasted” (Christiansen 2006: 162), he discusses them as families. This points towards a generally positive view on the transferability of “noble” status on Viking-age Scandinavia. He also clarifies that “status could also be achieved, as well as accepted”, pointing out to three different areas (Iceland, the British Danelaw and the Swedish Mälardal) which had different modes to acquire it. (Christiansen 2006: 61-62).

<sup>97</sup> What follows is a short exposition of the arguments I gave in the somewhat more literary-oriented paper “Hænsa-Þórir: the limits of the gift.”, which is attached as appendix 1.

exchanges) makes him fail in playing the game of reciprocity. This is also evident when he tries to set up an alliance to protect himself and pursue legal actions against the *goði* (who simply took the hay by force). On that situation he misunderstands alliance through kinship, failing to conduct properly the fostering of the son of a prominent man. And Þórir (like Auðunn, and like Ölkofri) is single, and seems not to attempt to marry.

The failure of Þórir to act with the proper politics of a prosperous man (i. e. like a Big Man) appears to be related to his lack of lineage. The contrast between the way he is presented and the way the other characters in the saga are introduced is striking; all others are given lineages, family ties and established farms but he is not. The origins of his riches is not so different from that of Oddr Ófeigsson, but Þórir is nobody's son. His only relative in the saga is a scoundrel like him<sup>98</sup>. His tale seems to illustrate that *parvenus* are not able to reach the level of men of good family even while they make money, and this is consistent with our hypothesis on the limits of Big Man-ship within medieval Iceland. Yet, the malicious and unsociable nature of Þórir raises some doubts, as part of his inability to rise in society could be attributed to a total lack of the personal qualities necessary for it.

### 5.3 Þórhallr ölkofri

Þórhallr ölkofri (ale-hood) is the main character of a very long *þáttr* (or very short saga) who makes money by brewing and selling ale at the *þing*. He is described in unflattering terms: small, ugly and rather stingy, but wealthy and dexterous to work wood and iron (*hagr við iarn og tre*, Aulkofra saga, 15<sup>99</sup>). Later he will publicly display cowardice and fear (“he was standing and wept heavily” *stod hann þar ok gret aumliga*, Aulkofra saga 17). He was referred to only by his nickname, because people could not remember his name, a clear indication of his status as a nobody. He accidentally burns a forest of his own and one belonging to six *goðar*. This triggers a conflict between them.

Þórhallr at first laughs at the accusation saying he has many friends, and the saga informs that he knew many important people thanks to his trade. But when he goes to the booths to

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<sup>98</sup> The idea of “bad family” appeared already in another ambitious and negative figure, Óspakr from *Bandamanna saga*, and seems to be a necessary mirror of the idea of “good family”, much like the ideology of the Big Man needs the Rubbish Man for contrast.

<sup>99</sup> Due to lack of access to the standard ÍF volume, I am forced to quote the non-normalized edition by Gering.

ask them for help, they all deny him on the grounds he never showed them any favours and that the opposition was too strong (Aulkofra saga 16). He seems to be confused about which are the grounds for using exchange in a socially productive way. Much like Þórir, he confuses selling and buying with sociable forms of exchange; when his buyers realize he intends more than pure mercantile activities, they even reject to trade with him (*engi villdi eiga kaup við hann*, Aulkofra saga 16). The grounds on which he finally obtains some help are those of fairness or pity, as the chieftain Broddi thinks him to not be like an outlaw (*skogarmaðr*, Aulkofra saga 16); his social skills or ties had nothing to do with this. He was said to be as unpopular as the beer he sells (Aulkofra saga 15). The tale says little else of Þórhallr's activities beyond this point. He becomes a part of Broddi's following (*Olkofri gekk þa i lið Brodda*, Aulkofra saga 18) and this proves to be a proper place for him; the outcome of the case is a small fine. In opposition to the violent end Þórir had, Þórhallr is just simply said to be out of the story. But, unlike Þórir, Þórhallr gave up any claims to a position. The implied morals are that humility is the appropriate attitude for small men.

Beside the parallels with Hænsa-Þóris saga, it is interesting to compare this story with *Bandamanna Saga*, as the latter might have used it as one of its sources or viceversa (Magerøy 1981:XLI), the insult scenes (*senna*) in both being rather similar. But Oddr and Þórhallr, even if there are some narrative parallels between them, do not have the same social standing: Oddr is popular and generous; Þórhallr stingy and disliked. And its interesting to note that the providentially provided defender also differs in origin, if not in its literary function. In one case is the father of the accused, in the other is just a man of goodwill. Again, the presence or lack of “good family” seems to be determinant to assign status. *Ölkoфра þáttr* might be read as a satire about pride and greed as much as *Bandamanna saga*, but its protagonist is far from being akin to a Big Man and (or because) is socially clumsy beyond his material wealth.

#### 5.4 Auðunn<sup>100</sup>

*Auðunar þáttr* is an exposition of the virtues of generosity, intelligence and luck. The main focus is on the generosity of kings, as its presence in *Morkinskinna* seems to indicate. But as Miller (2008) has recently shown, the virtues of Auðunn are also highlighted, even if in a quite

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<sup>100</sup> What follows involves many arguments already exposed on the paper “How to do things with Gifts: Gjafa-Refs þáttr and Auðunar þáttr vestfirzka.”, attached as appendix 2.



different scale than those of both the Danish and Norwegian monarchs. As opposed to Þórhallr and Þórir, Auðunn is depicted on very positive terms, ranging from clever merchant to holy fool according to the scene. He is a great trader, and makes his initial money by oceanic commerce much like Oddr Ófeigsson (after he gives up fishing, his original source of wealth), and is opposed again to pedlars like Ale-hood and Þórir<sup>101</sup>. He has not a family of importance; we know of a mother, who is more a burden than an asset for Auðunn, and whose upkeep is one of the reasons Auðunn rejects taking a position in the Danish court.

The same tale exists in a hyperbolic, folk-like and probably later version, *Gjafa-Refs þátr*, which adds to the clever gift-giver some lineage and says nothing about trade. Both stories end with rather different outcomes. Refr ends married and with the title of Jarl, Auðunn simply goes back to his home area to (presumably) lead the life of a prosperous farmer. This comparison might show again the ideological difference attached to man with and without families, beyond the exaggerated style of *Gjafa-Refs þátr*. But even if we compare the more down-to-earth career of Auðunn with that of Oddr Ófeigsson. It is striking how both choose different paths after becoming rich. Oddr, as we have seen, tries to mingle in the political game of redistribution and prestige in Iceland. Auðunn, who also aims for prestige, attempts to enter the retinue of Scandinavian kings. The social networks where they are able to manoeuvre might explain the difference: Auðunn knows traders. Oddr knows traders too, but also has farmers as friends who insist that he buy property and act like a rich farmer (and therefore, as akin to a Big Man). Oddr also has a family who might help, either directly (in the figure of his father) or attaching some aura of reliability to him. Auðunn's only family needs assistance, and provides nothing for him; to play in a game where family ties (either by blood or by alliance) are of relevant importance for success would have been a bad bet for Auðunn, who prefers the paths of service and holiness (in his pilgrimage to Rome). His other possibility for *status* could have been in martial prowess, but he is not said at all to be the type of a fighter<sup>102</sup>, much in line with most merchants appearing in the sagas.

All the sympathy the author used to depict Auðunn seems to not be enough to make him able to achieve a fundamental leap in social standing for himself. He is, nevertheless, said to

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<sup>101</sup> The difference between internal and external trader in the social value attached to them in pre-industrial societies has been a classic topic of substantivist anthropology, after the works of Karl Polanyi. Helgi Þorláksson has shown that the attitudes towards tradesmen in medieval Iceland are “well in accordance with Polanyi’s statements about archaic and simple societies” (Helgi Þorláksson 1992: 244)

<sup>102</sup> But he is not either a coward as Þórir is.

have some descendants, but the lineage to them is not described until we reach the rich (Auðunar þátr vestfirzka, 4:368, footnote 1) Þorsteinn Gyðuson, who should be his grandson or great-grandson (Miller 2008: 15), even if the genealogical link between them is not made clear. Yet, *Auðunar þátr* keeps in line with the hypothesis that at least some lineage was required to act like a Big Man in medieval Iceland.

## 5.5 Final remarks

As we have seen, these three short stories could<sup>103</sup> also provide support to the idea that the main limit to the applicability of the ideal Big Man type is that some proper lineage, or at least an (even diffuse) membership in a “good family” was a prerequisite to act like a Big Man with at least some success. In other words, the “Icelandic Big Man” is not a complete self-made man, but a man made by himself and his family.

The idea that power and kinship are necessarily related is consistent with the origin of Icelandic society. While most evolutionary models which include Big-Man societies place them as a step below chiefdoms (and therefore two steps below states), Iceland was a society whose structure was “de-evolved” (Byock 2001), from more complex types present in viking-age Norway, or the even more complex societies of the British Isles, both origins of the original settlers.

But, to say that a society adapts by simplifying its social structure does not mean that the “ideal”<sup>104</sup> (or maybe super-structural) level changed mechanically with the material or structural base. The idea that ancestry automatically grants different status from the beginning to some men and not to others is all but uncommon in chiefdoms, which depend on an ideology of inheritable qualities to ensure the legitimacy of the leaders and thus reproduce as chiefdoms. This does not need to mean that an equality between “good families” does exist: some groups,

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<sup>103</sup> Evidently, this idea will require far more empirical case analysis, especially with similar figures taken from sagas of contemporaries. The three cases are from stories which belong to the *Íslendingasögur* genre, and *Auðunar þátr* also belongs in the *konungasögur*. *Gjafa-Refs þátr* is technically part of the *formaldarsögur* as its included in *Gautreks saga*, but it will be hard to tell it apart in style from some of the most marvellous and un-naturalistic *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>104</sup> I use it in a sense close to Godelier’s “idéel” in his *L’Idéal et le Matériel*, whose translation into English (as “mental” in *The mental and the material*) could be quite misleading, but prevents a confusion with the most usual meaning of “ideal”. What I mean is the non-material (in the common, not in the Marxist sense of the word) part of the structure of the social relationships, including those that organize the relations of appropriation, production and distribution, and which therefore still belong to the structural level and are thus also partly placed at the level of the productive forces, to say it in (sadly over-technical) neo-Marxist terminology.

able to claim genealogical ties with royal or aristocratic lineages, are above others<sup>105</sup>. But good families collectively oppose people who cannot claim to belong to any family, which in turn range from scoundrel like Þórir or the stereotypical dumb-and-clumsy saga slave to prosperous folks like Auðunn or Úlfarr the freedman. This difference, had it been real or (at least) ideological<sup>106</sup> seems to set the division line for those able to walk the path of Big-Man and those unable to. Moreover, the existence of different layers of rank inside those belonging to the group of “good families” logically became more acute with the concentration of power in the hands of a few aristocratic families, even while the only formal difference between men (slavery) had long disappeared.

In general, and especially in that situation, it seems logical that men of good family, but not from the highest layer of society will try to place their children one step above them, using marriage with high-born daughters as a vehicle for an inter-generational rise, as both the cases of Ögmundr’s and Kálfr’s sons (Jón karl and Guttormr) and the family origin of their wives could show. This also helps to explain how “Icelandic social arrangements provided for more continuity of power than did arrangements usually found in big-man societies” (Byock 2001: 66), at least from an ideological point of view, and puts a limit<sup>107</sup> to applicability of the idea of “Big Man society” for medieval Iceland, as it always contained in itself elements of rank-by-kinship quite akin to those of chiefdoms<sup>108</sup>.

Icelanders might have carried the idea that family background was decisive for social mobility with them from the continent. It never faded away<sup>109</sup>, even Saga-Age Iceland still seems to had been closer Big-Man societies than to a state or chiefdom or collection of them. It is significant that while the archæological record of the settlement period shows a materially poorer society compared to that of continental Scandinavia in the same era, it still seems that

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<sup>105</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson (2009: 156) suggests that the direct descendants of the first settlers constituted this Icelandic farming elite, associated with the best farms. Above them, the *godar* will constitute the political elite.

<sup>106</sup> Could it had been retroactively applied to the family of successful nobodies?. The answer depends on how reliable are considered the narratives of social rise present in the sagas.

<sup>107</sup> Ideally, “a big man has personally created his power, and does not accumulate wealth or ritual power to be inherited by a successor” (Brown 1990: 97).

<sup>108</sup> Our conclusion seems to be in line with the “current trend to emphasize the aristocratic character of Nordic Society” (Bagge 2009: 53), as long as we take the idea of “aristocratic” in a quite broad way; it seems more logical to simply qualify it as non-egalitarian, some exception being made for the late commonwealth.

<sup>109</sup> The continuity of the link between land, kinship and power seemed so evident to Gurevich that he did not separate Iceland from other Nordic areas while discussing the ideas attached to gifts, wealth, property and family in these contexts, treating them as unity. See Gurevich (1968. The same ideas are slightly reworked in Gurevich 1972).

the settlement was planned to some extent. Noblemen are the likely candidates for that planning (Orri Vésteinsson 2005:12-13, 1998), and thus the resulting society will involve also a pattern of hierarchical differences from the beginning<sup>110</sup>. Moreover, the constant contact, exchange, and desire for emulation the Icelanders (or at least, the Icelandic elites) had with the more stratified continental societies probably contributed to keep this ideology alive. When the power concentration in the late commonwealth period reduced the number of powerful people in the country, it was expectable that these were grouped in families, like the Sturlungar or Oddaverjar, even if the nature of this aristocracy was now more territorial than personal. While it seems that the territorialization of power in the continent at the time involved a “deparentalization”<sup>111</sup> of it (Morsel 2004, 2007: 137-168) in Iceland this was far from the case, with the dominant groups being structured in terms of both kinship *and* space up to the end of the commonwealth. It seems logical that if this principle of lineage as a mark of power never disappeared, even in the most “de-evolved”, less stratified period of the Icelandic middle ages, it will resurface strongly as an organising principle with the concentration of power and the formation of a true aristocracy.

It also seems to be true that the Big-Man-like type of leadership had some impact in the actual behaviour of later, Chief-like leaders, and on the means of obtaining legitimacy and reproducing their power. Their personal qualities still mattered heavily, even while they acted in a bigger scale and had possibilities of action and attributes of power that were far beyond those held by figures like the early leaders, or those of their own subordinate, local leaders. As an example, Þorgils skarði might have been quite above Sturla or Hrafn, but he still held feasts, bestowed gifts and appeared in the assemblies, and his popularity with local farmers mattered to understand him as much as his ability to use military force against them.

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<sup>110</sup> This does not automatically mean that it was possible to reproduce in time these hierarchies given the context of material scarcity. The disappearance in Iceland of some of the traits typical of societies with well-defined, stable elites (like the presence of patronised specialized craftsmen) combined with the continuity of an idea of hierarchical outdoing typical of redistribution-based society can explain how Big Man appear, as the prestige goods were now available for potentially more candidates; in fact, the sagas tend to show that the items given as gifts in Iceland tended to be materially unimpressive if compared to those of other agonistically-based societies. This would lead to a simplification of what goods will be usable as prestige-goods (See Wickham 2005:69), and thus to the expansion of which members of society could possibly accumulate and redistribute them; in other words, that gifting *vadmál* or beer was less exclusive than gifting ornate silver armbands or silk clothing. An augmented availability of what could be used as prestige goods could lead to an increase in the competitive prestige-gathering practices, both broadening its social base and intensifying its frequency. A similar situation has been explained in a classical article by Piddocke (1965) for the type-case, the Kwaikutl potlatch, which transformed in that sense thanks to the affluence of cheap Western goods from a much less spectacular origin.

<sup>111</sup> The original French word is *déparentalisation*, by which it means the dissolution of kinship as the dominant principle; the English translation is quite misleading, but used by the Author as a keyword (Morsel 2007)

A last point that deserves some comment is the institutional backing that all the cases under analysis had, which might be seen as another limit for the applicability of the Big Man type to medieval Iceland. This might be not so determinant as it seems at first glance, mainly because this positions could be bought or established (like the early *godðorð*) or created by social tie-building (like the backing of some Church authority or control of the commune). If it was a step to the acquisition of power<sup>112</sup>, it was more a necessary acquisition than a barrier. In other words, more than a precondition for power, it seems to have been a mark of it. In the same vein, the ideal Big Man could also obtain symbolic rank through obtaining positions in selected groups like secret male-only initiated societies, but this was more a consequence than a cause of their power-building. Formal ownership of a *godðorð* was not required to be considered important, and such a prominent and influential figure like Njáll Þorgeirsson did not hold one. In the early period, the fact that *godðorð* were inheritable and tradable puts them as an asset at least theoretically available to anyone who had the money to buy one, or even the will to establish one. Moreover, that inept, unskilled *godðar* could lose (and lost) their followers and so their status also means that the position itself was not enough to grant power to the holder, even if it surely granted some advantages. The same holds true for the connections to the Church, which were not a formal position. That (early) *godðar* are a case of Big Man-like behaviour does not mean that both categories are the same, as some scholarship pretends<sup>113</sup>, and should be understood that some of the economic and political advantages which helped into political manoeuvring were ready for those owning a *godðorð*. But it also demanded expenses and responsibilities which (up to a certain point at least) balanced the benefits it provided<sup>114</sup>. The concentration of *godðorð* in the hands of aristocratic lineages during the late-commonwealth should have made the ownership of them one of the mark of Chief-like, aristocratic status, and no longer a determinant asset for Big Man-like figures.

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<sup>112</sup> As it seemed to for the case of Oddr.

<sup>113</sup> See section 1.1 above.

<sup>114</sup> There has been a long historiographical debate between those seeing the position of a *godði* as a source of decisive economic and social advantages and those who emphasize its costs (A summary in Byock 2001: 386-387. His own position is quite with the first group). The arguments for an actual advantage of *godðorð* ownership are strong as long as we do not imagine the saga sources as idealising (at least not too much) the role of chieftains, and that institutional roles had been stable and functional even while they were not backed by strong coercive power. In other words, that the legal-institutional privileges of a group whose authority cannot be enforced with certainty still somehow managed to be socially accepted, and that sagas are basically reliable sources for an anthropological/social reading. Given the difficulties to answer in a definitive way but especially the lack of direct pertinence of that debate to this work, we prefer an intermediate position

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## Appendix 1: Hænsa-Þórir: the limits of the gift.

*Madame Jourdain: Vous êtes fou, mon mari, avec toutes vos fantaisies, et cela vous est venu depuis que vous vous mêlez de hanter la noblesse.*

*Monsieur Jourdain: Lorsque je hante la noblesse, je fais paraître mon jugement, et cela est plus beau que de hanter votre bourgeoisie.*

(Molière, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, III, iii)

The saga of Hænsa-Þórir (Þórir of the poultry) is a short saga about early Icelanders, whose main character has been described as “simply a dishonourable villain” (Vesteinn Ólasson 1998: 159, 160. He also notes that “no special explanations of [his] behaviour is given”), or as “the perfect model of meanness” (Andersson 2006: 164). It also has been said that “on chercherait en vain un trait positif de son caractère (...) c’est un homme retors et associable, l’image même de ce qu’on appelle familièrement le “mauvais coucheur” (Boyer 1988: 21). At least he lacks any of the virtues of well-known saga protagonists such as Njáll, Egill or Snorri Goði. It is a tale that satirizes the *nouveau riche* Þóri, in his attempts to climb upwards the social scale. The saga is especially interesting as it shows the conflict between two different classes (in the broad sense of the word) that is absent in most sagas: the established aristocracy and the common people. This is not to say that sagas do not include many different social groups, but these are usually integrated in the feuding process involving different factions of the elite, where the members with less status (small peasants, tenants, slaves) take part in one of those sides as the clients under a patronage system<sup>115</sup>. This saga, on the other hand, provides a clear opposition between the old (represented by established leaders, like Blund-Ketill or Arngrímur Goði) and the new rich (Þórir), while still proceeding in the form of feud to a good extent.<sup>116</sup>

The saga structure is straightforward. The first chapter presents the main characters. The chapters II-IV contrast the way Ketill and Þórir build social ties. Chapter V explains the origins of the conflict between them, and chapters VII-IX the development of the feud, which ends with the burning of Ketill. Then the next phase of the feud, which goes until the death of Þórir by those in Ketill’s faction, goes on until chapter XV. The last two chapters tell of a marriage that brings the two families of chieftains (that of Ketill and that of Arngrímur) that were potential enemies because of the way they took part in the feud. That finally ends the conflict.

Despite being a short saga, there is not a chapter which is unnecessary to the main plot, and this results in a compact, focused narrative. The first chapter is particularly interesting in the way it presents the characters:

“Oddr hét maðr Qnundarson breiðskeggs, Úlfssonar, Úlfars sonar á Fitjum, Skeggja sonar, Þóris sonar hlammanda; hann bjó á Breiðabólstað í Reykjardal í Borgarfirði”, (...) “Torfi hét maðr ok var Valbrandsson, Valþjófs sonar, Ørlygs sonar frá Esjubergi; hann átti Þuríði Tungu-Oddsóttur; þau bjuggu á qðrum Breiðabólstað. Arngrímur hét maðr, Helgason, Hqgnasonar, er út kom með Hrómundi; hann bjó í Norðrtungu.” (...), “Blund-Ketill hét maðr, sonr Geirs ins auðga ór Geirshlíð, Ketils sonar blunds,

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<sup>115</sup> On the dominance of feud between multi-class factions over struggle between groups, see Árni Daniel Júlíússon (2004). The emphasis on patron-client relationship as one of the defining features of peasant societies goes back to Wolf (1966)

<sup>116</sup> Much like in Molière’s play, the main interest of Þórir is to integrate into the ranks of the established aristocracy, and he actively seeks association with the chieftain Arngrímur and access to the logics of factional feuding.

er Blundsvatn er við kennt; hann bjó í Örnólfsdal.” (...), “Þórkell trefill hét maðr. Hann var Rauða-Bjarnarson; hann bjó í Svignaskarði fyrir útan Norðrá. Helgi var bróðir Þórkels, er bjó í Hvammi í Norðrárdal.” (Hns. 1, 3-6)

[Oddr was the name of a man, the son of Qunndr broad-beard, the son of Úlfr, the son of Úlfar á Fitjum, the son of Skeggi, the son of Þórir hlammanda; he lived in Breiðabólstað í Reykjardal in the fjord of Borg. (...) “Torfi was the name of a man and was the son of Valbrand, the son of Valþjófr, the son of Örylgr of Esjuberg; he married Þuríðr the daughter of Tungu-Oddr; they lived in another [farm also named] Breiðabólstað. Arngrímr was named a man, the son of Helgi, the son of Hoggni, that came with Hrómundr; he live in Norðrtunga (...), “Blund-Ketill was named a man, the son of Geirr the deep from Geirshlíð, the so of Ketill Blundr, after whom Blundsvatn is known; he lived in Örnólfsdalr (...), “Þórkell trefill was named a man. He was the son of Raud-Björn; he lives in Svignaskarði, west of Norðrá. Helgi was the brother of Þórkell, who lives in Hvamm in Norðrárdalr<sup>117</sup>]

On the other hand, this is the first depiction of Þórir, that follows the previous ones, and that we quote *in extenso*:

“Þórir hét maðr. Hann var snauðr at fé ok eigi mjök vinsæll af alþýðu manna. Hann lagði þat í vanða sinn, at hann fór með sumarkaup sitt heraða í milli ok seldi þat í qðru, er hann keypti í qðru, ok græddisk honum brátt fé af kaupum sínum. Ok eitt sinn, er Þórir fór sunnan um heiði, hafði hann með sér hæns í qðr norðr um land ok seldi þau með qðrum kaupskap, ok því var hann kallaðr Hænsa-Þórir. Nú græðir Þórir svá mikit, at hann kaupir sér land, er at Vatni heitir upp frá Norðrtungu, ok fá vetr hafði hann búit, áðr hann gerðisk svá mikill auðmaðr, at hann átti undir vel hverjum manni stórfé. En þó at honum græddisk fé mikit, þá heldusk þó óvinsældir hans, því at varla var til óþokkasælli maðr en Hænsa-Þórir var.” (Hns. 1, 6)

[Þórir was named a man. He was poor in wealth and not very blessed-with-friends with all men. He had this habit; he travelled around his district with a summer-shop and sold in one place what he bought in another, and he soon accumulated a lot of wealth from his commerce. And one time, when Þórir travelled over the heath northwards, and had with him poultry, he sold them along with other goods and because of this he was called Þórir of the poultry. Now Þórir earned so much, that bought himself land, that is called Vatn, up from Norðrtunga, and few winters had he inhabited there before he became such a wealthy man, that many men owed him big sums. But even if he earned a lot of money, his lack of friends remained, so that there was hardly a mas so disliked as Þórir of the poultry was”]

While it can be seen in the first type of introductions is that they follow the formula: X was named a man, son of Y (son of Z, etc...), and lived in N, sometimes including other comments about the character. The recurrent elements are lineage and dwelling place. Þórir lacks both at the beginning; he buys himself land with the money he earns from trade, and then buys himself ties of kinship through the fostering of Arngrímr’s son. Through those means Þórir tries to achieve for himself a higher status.

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<sup>117</sup> Translations are mine, and sometimes they differ from well-known editions like that made by Hermann Pálsson (1975). The quoted original passages are from the standard edition in ÍF III, and will be quoted as Hns., followed by chapter and page number.

## Context of Production.

As with other sagas, there is neither known author nor precise date of composition for this saga. A very short story about Þórir was mentioned by Ári Fróði in his *Íslendingabók*, but there are several differences.<sup>118</sup> The saga has been dated roughly to the middle of the thirteenth century. This complex period of Icelandic history involves the loss of formal independence and the subjugation to the king of Norway, after a long period of concentration of power and violent conflict between a few prominent families. The area of Borgarfjörður, where the saga was composed, was one of the last zones to become a domain (*níki*) under the control of a single family, the Sturlungar near 1220, a process of concentration of power that was already finished in the most other areas of the country by that time (Jón Víðar Sigurðsson 1999: 62-83). The meteoric career of Snorri Sturluson, the most famous member of the Sturlungar, provides an excellent case to show the path of upwards social mobility. The reasons for Snorri's rise lie in his ability to maximize the different kinds of capital available to him (Torfi Tulinius 2009). Yet, that process pre-dates the composition of the saga by approximately two generations. At the time the saga was composed the patterns of social mobility had changed. Our hypothesis is that the saga reflects this change, a phenomena that is probably to be linked with the rising self-awareness of the dominant families (Jón Víðar Sigurðsson 1999).

The saga does not reject social mobility *per se*, but the clumsy attempts of individuals lacking enough social capital to climb. There is nothing here of the purely aristocratic tone of well-known works of vernacular medieval literature, like many Arthurian romances or the *Nibelungenlied* that propose a stable society, where inferior groups are hidden or totally marginal to the aristocrats, which are under the spotlight. This saga is not different from most other *Íslendingasögur* in accepting that frontiers between groups were permeable. The comic figure of Þórir is partly a joke on social mobility, but this implies the recognition of mobility, as different from pure silence. As Régis Boyer pointed out, this is a society where the passion for riches and avarice, are as real as in all societies, “mais ici, ces réalités ne sont jamais pudiquement voilées” (Boyer, 1986:138). The greed of Þórir is not –and needs not to be– hidden, as it is not hidden in more positive saga characters like Egill Skallagrímsson or Snorri Goði. Moreover, sagas take for granted that it goes along with the aim to rise in the social scale. In fact, Boyer is doubtlessly right when he connects material ambition with a tendency towards crafty behaviour and subterfuge, “l’amour de la chicane”, whose aim is acquiring (Boyer, 1986: 139).

It is hard not to think of the saga as composed by, and aimed principally for the late-thirteenth century aristocrats like the Sturlungar. They will be quite conscious of their own ascension, and thus will not deny the virtues of it<sup>119</sup>, yet they will have a collective interest to dis-encourage others from trying to rise. To mock their attempts, to show where others fail (and, by opposition, where they succeeded) is just one possibility. Þórir is conveniently located in a distant past, and is a figure who nobody will claim descent from, thus making it a safe bet to ridicule.

## Development of the saga.

### Chapters II-IV: Building social ties.

After the introduction of the characters, the first scene of the saga begins. Þórir approaches the powerful chieftain Arngrímur and offers him to foster his son. The resistance of Arngrímur is quite understandable, as Þórir is not only of lowly origin, but – most importantly– disliked by everyone. The negotiation between them is interesting. Þórir says:

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<sup>118</sup> Summarized in ÍF 3, VII. The mention of the burning of Ketill in the *Íslendingabók* is in ÍF I, 5, 12

<sup>119</sup> As was historically preferred in the ideologies developed by very stable aristocracies (classical examples include dynastic Egypt, Inca empire, or absolutist France). It can reach such extremes as negating the passage of time, or making their position naturally unattainable by fictions of a different nature, divine status, etc.

“Vil ek hafa vináttu þína í mót ok fylgi til þess, at ek ná réttu af mönnum” Arngrímr svarar “Svá lizk mér, sem lítill hofudburðr muni mér at þessu barnfóstri” Þórir svarar: “Ek vil gefa sveinum hálf t fé mitt, heldr en ek ná eigi barnfóstrinu, en þú skalt rétta hluta minn ok vera skyldr til, við hvern sem ek á um” Arngrímr svarar “þat ætla ek mála sannast, at neita eigi því, er svá el vel boðit”. Fór þá Helgi með Þóri, ok heitir þar nú síðan bærrinn at Helgavatni. (Hns. 2, 7)

[“I want to have your friendship/alliance if in return it follows that I will have my rights over other men”. Arngrímr replied “It seems to me, that little reputation will I earn from that child-fostering”. Þórir replied “I want to give to the lad half my wealth, rather than not having the child-fostering, but you should assist me legally in my affairs, and be protective to me, in everything I could be into”. Arngrímr replied “I want to say it is reasonable, to not deny that which is so well offered”. Then Helgi went with Þórir, and thereafter the farm was named Helgavatn”]

Þórir constantly uses a contractual vocabulary; he specifies the terms, and is just bargaining. The core element lacking is time, which is fundamental for the logics of reciprocal tie-building (Bourdieu 1997). He *immediately* sets up the clauses, as “the fostering becomes yet another market item for him” (Durrenberger et al. 1989:153). If he succeeds at the basic level, that is, to translate the offer into a deal, his social position does not improve. When the author tells us that the farm of Þórir will be known by the name of his foster-son, the point is made: prestige will not change hands, and what Þórir got is simply an advocate. The passage uses the term *hofudburðr*, literally “the carrying of the head”, but which expresses the abstract meaning of “reputation”<sup>120</sup>, expressing what constitutes the prime goal for Arngrímr in dealings. But what Arngrímr gets is money, and nothing else, and this also does not improve his prestige; yet, his move is not frowned upon, but is –as the development of the saga shows- less than optimal. Both parts negotiate not only between themselves and their self-interest, but also taking into account the reaction of other members of society.

Then it is told that for Þórir, the relationship obtained is not significant in itself, but is just a tool to achieve more riches; he keeps accumulating wealth with the confidence on his deal with Arngrímr. He then becomes the most wealthy man (*inn mesti auðmaðr*, Hns. 2, 7), but remains as *óvinsall* (“unblessed-with-friends”) as he was before.

The saga now presents Blund-Ketill in a contrasting scene, and he behaves on a completely different way. A Norwegian merchant arrives, which is presented saying *hann var vinsall maðr ok inn bezti kaupdrengr* (“he was a man blessed with friends, and the best merchant”, Hns. 2, 8) in an obvious contrast with Þórir. A local chieftain, Oddr, pretends to use his right to set up the prices of items from incoming merchants (Byock 2001: 255-260). That is rejected by the merchant, Qrn, as Oddr *átti engan penning með* (“did not own any worth of”, Hns. 2, 8) his goods. He dismisses the political power of the chieftain, playing on the superiority of his property rights. Oddr then attempts to forbid them from selling in his district, and treats them like outlaws<sup>121</sup>, putting fines on those that deal with them.

Then Blund-Ketill enters into the conflict, and his son tells him of the situation of Qrn. Ketill explains in full detail his reasons to support Qrn: he spent his childhood with his father, and thus expects now to pay back. The passage is exemplary, explaining the working of delayed paybacks as the best ethnographic informant could do. He also says they bear a cause not worse than Oddr’s (*vér berum eigi verra mál til en Oddr*, Hns. 3, 10), denying him exclusive rights. Qrn accepts as expected, and the following scene is full of conventions: a warm welcome, and hospitality given with good entertainment (*í goðum fagnadi*, Hns. 3, 11).

<sup>120</sup> I prefer Fritznér’s *anseelse* to the reading by Cleasby, which gives “help, backing, support”. Zöega gives “Honour, prestige, credit”, thus agreeing mainly with Fritznér. Here the one looking for backing or support is not Arngrímr but Þórir.

<sup>121</sup> The word *björg*, here used in Oddr’s menace to those that help the merchants, means either “help” or “provisions given to an outlaw”.

Blund-Ketill respects tradition and behaves as properly as he should. The contrast between him and Arngrímur is only de-emphasized by the bigger contrast between Örn and Þórir. The saga portrays Örn positively mainly because he is foreign; while this might appear surprising at first, it should be noted that in societies where aristocracy is dominant (or raising) the position of *foreign* merchants as providers of prestige goods<sup>122</sup> is fundamental. Long-distance trade is always far from pure market and profit-seeking logics, as they do not take part *inside* a political community but *between* at least two of them. Örn reacts ignoring Oddr's authority, as he needs not to take into account the legitimacy of Icelandic institutions (which lacked executive power), especially as he has support from another chieftain. Collectively, the chieftains and other prominent men depended also on the goods imported by long-term trade, both in the timeframe of the saga and in the time of composition. Oddr personal ambition goes too far, and Blund-Ketill rights things to the necessary dependence of both groups. On the other hand, nobody needs a pedlar like Þórir, whose tradable good is no more than a farm animal.

The fourth chapter illustrates the way a good magnate-farmer deals with dependents. Ketill helps his tenants when they are short on hay for the winter. The term *landseti* ("tenant farmer" or "leaseholder") is not widely represented in the *Íslendingasögur*, and makes more sense in the big dominions of the thirteenth century than in the tenth; this reinforces the perception that the fictional flexibility of the past was used to discuss the problems of the present, either conscious or unconsciously.

The socially weak tenants should yet have had some tools to negotiate with the main farmer, as he had nothing to profit from miserable tenants. They probably also constituted part of his faction in case of feuding<sup>123</sup>. The asymmetrical, yet mutually dependant relationship between them explains the reason for Blund-Ketill to help them get hay, even when they fail to follow his advice.

Ketill turns to Þórir for hay, being unable to provide his tenants with enough hay of his own (as should have been normal, thus sustaining the paternal relationship). This happens because of an especially hard winter<sup>124</sup> makes his position as provider weak because of scarcity and also because of the number of potential claims of generosity<sup>125</sup>.

#### Chapters V-IX: the feud between Ketill and Þórir

The hay-request scene has already been subject to precise scrutiny (Miller 1986: 35-42) and is used again to contrast the proper behaviour of Ketill with the unsociable Þórir, and to trigger the main plot into action. Ketill tries first to buy hay, Þórir refuses to sell, as he misinterprets Ketill is asking for gifts, and then Þórir tries again to offer him a good commercial (but also generous) deal. Ketill finally takes the hay by force.

The arguments used by both sides are remarkably different. Þórir emphasizes precaution and safety, privacy, shows distrust and remarks his lack of dependants to carry on his tasks, which he must do by himself. Ketill, on the other hand, emphasizes generosity, force, and concern for the others. He is not only willing to help his tenants, but also is concerned with

<sup>122</sup> The fact that they are foreign, thus more expensive, limited and exotic, is what really matters: "The crucial point that needs to be made about luxuries is that they are marginal to any economic system, taken as a whole, precisely because they are restricted prestige goods (...) Anyway, some form of luxuries will always exist, because prestige exists; if the rich cannot get gold they will monopolize silver; if pepper is too freely available they will focus on cumin; and so on. In general, luxuries only represent prestige; the real economic system derives from how the wealth underpinning that prestige was built up" (Wickham 2005: 696-697)

<sup>123</sup> "Der Pächter mußte oft auch der Gefolgsmann seines Bauern bei Fehden" (Hoops et al. 1976-1978, entry "Bonde": 218)

<sup>124</sup> The ability of hard winters, flood or similar disasters to reveal the inner tensions of agrarian societies has been magisterially explained by Sahlins (1974) on his reading of Raymond Firth's classic *We, the tikopia*. The author of the saga logically has first-hand knowledge of this kind of tensions; it should be noted that even in mythical accounts of social disaster, like the *Völuspá*, the trigger for the rise of conflicts is a (hyperbolic) hard winter.

<sup>125</sup> This prompts Ketill to try helping his tenants secretly; the gossip of his generosity –which under normal conditions will raise his status-, brings him here into the uncomfortable situation of asking a nobody for hay. There is also an element of charity (or simple pity) on the reasons of Ketill to concede, as the saga states that *bonum þótti þormuligt at heyrá á þeira veinan* ("to him it seemed sad to hear about their –the tenants'- hardships", Hns. 4, 12).

Þórir's own stock, and takes care to leave plenty of hay for his cattle. The essential difference is expressed by two sentences; Ketill says *þat er sannligt, at þeir seli, sem til hafa* ("it is just, that they sell, those that have", Hns. 5, 13) while Þórir utters *þat muntu eiga allra heimilast, at veita þórum þitt, en eigi mitt* ("You have all the right to grant to others your property, but not mine", Hns. 5, 14). To say it in legal terms, Þórir insists on *abusus* as an undeniable part of the property rights.

Ketill's actions are driven by less individualistic ethics, and also by his own interest to provide his tenants, which benefits both them and him. Þórir rejection is more complex; even accepting he has quite a different idea on the extent of property rights, he would had gotten personal benefit from selling the hay. At least two explanations can be tried without recurring to the too simplistic idea that Þórir is simply evil. First, an economic one: the expectative of a terrible winter would had made the utility of the silver infinitely smaller than that of any extra hay. On the other hand, it might be argued that Þórir wants Ketill to fail in the hope of replacing him as the local leader or at least of enhancing his own position. The second explanation is preferable, as (a) the hay would rot before anyway –as it is later pointed by Arngrímur- and (b) Þórir ironically comments on his lack of men to Ketill during his refusal (*Fatt er hér verkanna*, "Few are here the labourers", Hns. 5, 16), and he is well aware of Ketill's superiority in terms of force, which would prevent Þórir from avoiding any attempt at forceful taking (*en veit ek, at er sá rískis unr okkar, at þú munt taka mega bet af mér, ef þú vill*, Hns 5, 15).

After the taking, Þórir tries to gather support for a case against Ketill. His first choice is, predictably, Arngrímur. Þórir accuses Ketill of *rán*<sup>126</sup>, and of emptying his reserves (*Blund-Ketill hefir rænt mik öllum beyjum*, "Blund-Ketill pillaged me of all my hay", Hns. 6, 17), making him unable to feed his cattle. Arngrímur asks his son, who tells him that that was not true, and that Blund-Ketill acted well (*fór vel með sínu máli*, Hns. 6, 17).

Arngrímur believes the version of his son because the story seems more plausible. The reputation of Ketill is a decisive factor. And sentences that *betr er þat bey komit, at hann hefir, en þitt, er fjúnar fyrir þér* ("Better has been that has put to use, that he has, than the one, which will rot in your possession", Hns. 6, 17). The accusation is not only of cheating about the action, but of greed and hoarding behaviour, and thus another rejection of the notion of *abusus*.

Þórir then blames Arngrímur for not paying him back (*launa*) for the fostering. Arngrímur rejection implies a strong moral qualification of Þórir (referred to one of the *vándum manni*, "wicked men"), who is not able to see beyond the purely contractual interpretation of his fostering agreement.

Then Þórir approached Oddr, and the scene follows the same pattern, emphasizing again the righteousness of Ketill's action and the word of the young Helgi. The next visit is made to Þórvaldr, the son of Oddr, and results fruitful for Þórir. Þórvaldr was out of the country, and the fact that Þórir was the foster-father of Helgi Arngrímsson and that Þórir offers him half his wealth (again specifying the exact limits: he wants Ketill outlawed or being given self-judgement) are enough for him, ignoring the advice against it by Arngrímur.

The seventh chapter also introduces the only kinsman of Þórir, a wanderer (*reikunarmaðr*), who roamed the whole country<sup>127</sup> (*hljóp hann á milli landsborna*, Hns. 7, 19) and who is described as being a similar kind of man that Þórir is (*áþekker bonum í skapsmunum*, hns 7, 19). This reinforces the negative portrait of those who lack permanent residence. It also marks that the character of Þórir is not exceptional, but reflects either his lineage and/or his social origin; the functional name of the vagrant, Viðfari (wide-farer), seems to emphasize the social element over the kinship element as the origin of the tendency.

This Viðfari and Helgi are the only retinue of Þórir when he summons Ketill, sharply in contrast with the thirty men coming with Þórvaldr and the reluctant Arngrímur. On their arrival, Ketill offers them food and hospitality which are plainly refused, marking the aggressive nature of the visit. Ketill offers again to pay for the hay, and to provide Þórvaldr for the settlement of the amount, but he remains faithful to his deal with Þórir (who presses him with his offering of wealth) and

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<sup>126</sup> Open forceful taking, to be distinguished from the more serious (hidden) thievery. (See Miller 1986: 18, 24)

<sup>127</sup> In-country travelling contrasts with the prestige attached to travelling abroad, that appears here in the form of the high-born Þórvaldr.



summons Ketill for *rán*. Ketill goes back to his house, furious, and he tells Qrn he was accused of being a pillager and a thief (*ek em kallaðr þjófr ok ránsmaðr*, Hns. 8, 23). Qrn replies by killing Helgi Arngrímsson, and Þórir uses the incident to incite others to burn Ketill. Again, Þórir insists later that burning is the only solution, as he does not accept the last-minute offer of Ketill to come to terms when they are about to burn him, showing his lack of sense of *bóf*, moderation, thus “slipping in the realm of *ójafnaðr*” (“Unevenness”. The colourful expression is taken from Byock, 2001: 191).

### Chapters X-XV: Revenge against Þórir.

As it is usual in the sagas, a close member of the family is in charge of taking revenge. Here is Hersteinn, son of Blund-Ketill. His paternal farm is claimed by Oddr, but he manages to save up the movable property, with the help of his foster-father. Then they obtain the help of Þórkell –who was introduced in the first chapter- in their attempts to match with Hersteinn the daughter of another farmer, Gunnarr. He asks for advice on this from Þórðr Gellir, who is fostering the girl, who recommends accepting because he remembers Ketill’s hospitality and gifts to him. Ketill’s property was exchanged for *status*, and his *status* is then transferred to his son<sup>128</sup>; inheritance is not only material. Gunnarr then persuades Þórðr to betroth the girl to Hersteinn instead of doing it himself, to strengthen the ties between both men.

Yet, they conceal him the fact that the marriage will imply taking part in the revenge. When Þórðr finally realises he is now part of it, he complains, but does not back down; the strength of the social norm is bigger than his individual will. Then Gunnarr comments (and is not risky to see the saga author in it):

“er nú vel, at þér reynið eitt sinn, hverr ydar drjúgastr er höfðingianna, því at þér hafið lengi úlfsmunni af etizk” (Hns. 11, 33)  
[It is now good, that you can prove in a trial who is the strongest of the prominent men, because you have for long time had a wolf-mouth towards each other]

This is a claim against the spread of power in many hands, as bitterly shows the conflict created by it. But also, claims that competition is the solution for it, to see who is the strongest to win in the contest; this supports again the idea that the author is strengthening the discourse of the dominant aristocratic families in the area, as the victors in that struggle.

In the marriage, Hersteinn claims he plans to fully outlaw Arngrímr or have self-judgement. Gunnarr says the same about Þórvaldr Oddsson. They expect Þórðr to go against Oddr (who is an old enemy of his), but he refrains. Each one has a target, and Þórir is not mentioned; he is unworthy, socially irrelevant, so revenge against him is not a publicly prestigious claim to make. Instead, when they summon them in the local assembly the accused are Arngrímr and Þórir.

Þórir decides to vanish from the district; the association between cowardice and wandering is now made evident<sup>129</sup>. Then both sides clash and the murderer’s faction manages to avoid actions against them at the local assembly. Hersteinn falls ill and remains at home, but the others go to the Alþing. There the tension keeps going, but mediators manage to avoid bloodshed, and it seems that the case would be settled in favour of the avengers. It is finally settled peacefully, and the burners outlawed, with full outlawry for Arngrímr. They are also forced to pay compensation.

Contrasting with this relatively peaceful, and socially visible (and therefore expected to be long-lasting) settlement, the last action of Þórir is to attempt an attack towards Hersteinn. Again, he misreads the change of intelligent action to take; as the

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<sup>128</sup> Gunnarr also points out at the risks implied in rejecting the offer. As it is expected in reciprocity-based logics, to refuse a gift (or, here, a marriage.) is a declaration of enmity; no neutral reaction could be expected.

<sup>129</sup> Part of the bad reputation of vagrants might derive from their marginality, which makes them hard to grasp by territorial institutions.

feud became too big, keeping violence going turned to be totally undesirable. The mediators in the Alþing, but also the sides involved know it, and thus the main aim is to avoid the feud from getting out of control (a common pattern in medieval Iceland: Byock 2001, ch. IX-XIII especially).

#### Chapters XVI-XVII: Final reconciliation

The last two chapters deal with the marriage of Þóroddr Oddsson to Jófríðr Gunnarsdóttir. He meets her and they get along well, but his father plans to expel Gunnarr from the farm they live in, which it is legally his property. That farm was originally the one of Ketill. Oddr took it after the burning. But it was later seized by the avenging faction and then given to Gunnarr, who repaired it. Þóroddr approaches Gunnarr, who is ready to defend himself from the inside with a bow (thus echoing the scene of a more famous Gunnarr, which is explicitly mentioned by the saga author) and parleys, trying to offer a settlement. Þóroddr asks for the hand of Gunnarr's daughter, and he accepts because he trusts the good will of the self-proposed groom. By this, Þóroddr intercedes and stops his father, saving Gunnarr from death. Oddr becomes furious, but nevertheless the feud ends thanks to this action. The saga concludes with some of the habitual remarks on the later life of the characters, including the peaceful death of Oddr.

This short last episode gives an end to the last unsolved issue in the saga, and shows how proper moderation and alliance stop bloodshed, a theme already started in the previous chapters. The contrast with Gunnarr of Hlíðarenði marks that the author rejects also his heroic path; if the saga condemns Þórir's cowardice, it does not endorse the glorious –but futile– death of Hallgerðr's husband. This Gunnarr behaves with common sense like all positively-portrayed characters in the saga do.

#### Understanding Þórir

Many readings of the saga approach it from a moralistic point of view, and comments on Þórir's behaviour simply explain him as bad-natured. Theodore Andersson wrote “he refuses to sell any hay out of pure malice” (Andersson 2006: 164. Similar to Vesteinn Ólasson 1998, 159: “innate malice and lack of honour”). On the other extreme, to explain Blund-Ketill, Toorn (1955: 49-50) sees a “primitive right of the strongest” associated to what he considers the rustic ethics of Hávamál. Neither a purely moral nor a purely “Darwinist” are satisfactory explanations; the second, because it is based on a naturalistic image of primitivism that is, after Levi-Strauss, totally outdated. The first, because it oversimplifies a character whose desire to secure himself a better position in society is ridiculed, like Molière's *Monsieur Jourdain*. The undeniable malice of Þórir is mixed with other traits, which make it not pure at all.

A more complex approach is taken in a collective article headed by E.P. Durrenberger (Durrenberger et al. 1989). The authors stress the differences in mentality that the saga author presents between Blund-Ketill and Þórir. They believe that these are signs of a change from a social paradigm based on hierarchical reciprocity to one based on market logics. This evolutionary position implies a structural change in late-medieval Iceland that did not happen historically; not to mention that market logics were already present in early medieval societies and before. Both mentalities *coexist* in medieval Iceland since the beginning as they did everywhere in medieval Europe. To claim that the literature is biased towards depicting the sphere of reciprocity does not deny the fact that the other existed, and that long distance trade is much more represented in the sagas than small-scale inner trade has much to do with the integration between this kind of trade and reciprocal/redistributive economies.

There is indeed change, but not general systemic change. It is better described as a closing of the ranks of the upper layers of society, associated with the rise of territorial dominions and the diminishing importance of interpersonal tie-building and later with the association with the continental monarchy. The economic base of a *lendurmaður* is not structurally different from that of an early commonwealth *goði* or from the leader of a territorial dominion; we are always speaking about the control of

pastoral and agrarian resources, and of the benefits of authority and influence over lesser men. The difference lies in the change of the political and social paths to acquire and maintain those positions, which are sensibly different in both situations. Þórir does not know how to play according to any of those rules, because of his “market mentality” and his lack of both symbolic and cultural capital to back his moves. He also adds an inability to transform part of his material capital into the other types, as a necessary part of the path towards social ascension.

But he could hardly be considered a “new man” of the entrepreneurial type; his tale could not be retold as heroic, as the authors propose (Durrenberger et al. 1989, 157-158). Þórir, like Monsieur Jourdain, wants to join the aristocracy playing the game of social ascension, but misunderstands the way to properly use the cards; but there is no change of rules intended by him.

### **Status and the circulation of things.**

On which principles do these rules rest? As the saga rarely tells about the ideas or the inner world of the characters, the analysis of their actions is a preferable path to grasp what made Þórir *óvinsall*, and what made Ketill –even if he dies– *vinsall*. The other characters are placed somewhere between these extremes, and their actions (and their reputations) are more mixed.

As we have seen, Þórir attempts to transform his wealth into prestige. He is even able to go beyond his quest for profit in his manoeuvrings to debase Ketill; he rejects his silver when Ketill claims its universal utility as payment method (“Silfr gengr í allar skuldir hér á landi, ok gef ek þér þat við”. Hns. 5, 15-16). He earns money, buys a house, buys himself a foster-son and through it an ally in legal matters, and then buys himself another ally for revenge. As Miller (1986, 1990) has noticed, commerce is one of the modes of exchange available in Medieval Iceland; yet is a neutral or slightly negative, not social-building method of exchange (See Sahlins 1974).

The problem is not in the fact that Þórir uses those tools; but that he does not use any others, and does not grasp the difference between them and more sociable modes of exchange. He offers no feasts for his allies, nor gives them any room for generosity, as he specifies all the limits of the agreements. Once he secures status through his alliance with Arngrímur, he uses it to achieve more wealth instead of more status. The lack of social capital makes him pathetic; then he resorts to lying, cowardice and even tries murder, completing his negative portrayal, and providing an example to the audience of the risk of trying to go higher than you can actually manage.

Blund-Ketill is totally the opposite. He is also rich, but uses his wealth with generosity. He has offered hospitality, gifts, and help to everybody; he even offers gifts in *addition* to payment when trying to persuade Þórir<sup>130</sup>. Yet his generosity is careful, and his single mistake –being forced by an indiscreet (but grateful) tenant to help other tenants while short of extra hay– is what leads him to the desperate situation of asking Þórir for help. But given the choice of risking his status or risking deals with an untreatable man, he tries the second.

Other characters, even if less virtuous than Ketill, know how to play on the rules of alliance and generosity. The trick to get Þórðr into the feud is quite crafty, yet there is no condemnation of it. Þóroddr betrothal offer to Gunnarr is a display of diplomacy of force, yet it gives a graceful end to the feud.

Where do these differences stem from? Oddr (and Þóroddr), Arngrímur, Ketill, Þórkell<sup>131</sup> possess a lineage, a farm, wealth and even other dignities (a *gøðorð* for Arngrímur). Gunnarr is of lesser rank, but plays his subordinate –yet well-connected– role accordingly.

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<sup>130</sup> But this can also be read as an aggressive move, as an agonistic display of superiority aimed to overcome Þórir. Which, in good maussian logic, does not mean that it ceases to be generous.

<sup>131</sup> Þórðr is a more obscure, and is not introduced with the other farmers at the beginning of the saga.

The main exception, Þórvaldr Oddsson, has been outside of the country, so he misreads Þórir as being a worthy man. Arngrímr quickly realizes his greed has made him commit a huge mistake entering into an alliance with Þórir; after his son dies (and the well-timed verse of revenge created by Þórir as the last words of the dying lad) he has no choice but to continue in that disastrous path.

The saga thus displays a tempered aristocratic ideal; you need some lineage and some wealth to earn yourself status, and you need status to earn yourself *lasting* lineage and wealth; these are the things that should be kept to pass on (Godelier 2009), the “inalienable possessions”<sup>132</sup> that lie behind and empower the logics of generosity, of sociable reciprocity. Personal qualities still matter, as there is a difference between Oddr and Ketill, and this still gives some room for cases of social mobility, both upwards and downwards, as plausible phenomena. But all signals point that you need some previous capital other than wealth to start with, or be the object of contempt, ridicule, and even a shameful death.

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<sup>132</sup> The idea stems from Weiner (1992), and was extensively elaborated by Godelier (1994). Both authors focus on contemporary –but very different– societies.

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## Appendix 2: How to do things with Gifts: Gjafa-Refs þáttir and Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka.

Inside the corpus of the sagas, we can isolate a small number of *þáttir* whose plot is driven by unimportant but clever men who manipulate gifting to achieve a better status for themselves. The group includes (and seems to be limited to<sup>133</sup>) a short tale found in *Gautreks Saga* inside the *foraldarsögur* corpus, *Gjafa-Refs þáttir* (the tale of Gift-Refr). It is preserved in three manuscripts, two paper copies from the seventeenth century and a vellum copy from the fifteenth century (*Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda III*: VI). It is generally considered to have been composed in the late thirteenth century; the oldest version is shorter. We use the younger, which is more fruitful for analysis; both versions include *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*.

The other member of the group, *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka* (the tale of Auðunn from the westfjords) is preserved in three (close) versions, the best one<sup>134</sup> from *Flateyjarbók*, but the oldest from *Morkinskinna*, giving the text a date no later than 1217-1222 (the accepted period of composition of the work, while the manuscript is from ca. 1275; the area of composition is not established, but *Auðunar* seems to be linked with the north-west. See Andersson and Gade 2000: 66-67).

Ciklamini (1997) sees *Auðunar þáttir* as belonging in the *exempla* genre<sup>135</sup>, and promoting strength of character, determination, and equality of spirit. While its exemplary value is hard to deny given the didactic style of the narrative and its references to Christian ideal patterns of behaviour, the principal values upheld are not necessary those highlighted by the author. For example, it is disputable that the saga places Auðunn and the kings as equals in any sense, neither material nor spiritual. The recognition of Auðunn's virtues are paired with mention of his flaws, while the kings (especially Sveinn, king of Denmark) are portrayed as flawless.

The tale of Gift-Refr (not discussed by Ciklamini) is placed further away from moral overtones<sup>136</sup>, as both the protagonist and his mentor, Jarl Neri, will be pragmatically wise and cunning but not especially virtuous. Consequently, the question on which values are promoted by these tales remains an open one. We aim to propose a possible reading of the promoted values and actions exemplified by both, through the analysis and comparison of them. This will be focused in the main theme of the narratives, which is a practice (gifting) closely tied to a specific set of values<sup>137</sup>.

A very important antecedent exists to the approach we take in this text, in the form of an article written nearly three decades ago by E. Paul Durrenberger (1982). The article focuses on *Gautreks saga* as a whole and not only in *Gjafa-Refs þáttir*. The author uses extensively the tools created by structuralism in his effort to understand the saga, as well as much ethnographic material. He reads the saga negatively and concludes that “the story indicates that asymmetric reciprocity is just as dangerous and foolish as non-reciprocity (...) there is no resolution, no suggestion of appropriate reciprocal relations” (Durrenberger 1982: 31). While it is evident that the structure of the saga is rather loose, especially in the younger redaction, to see it as lacking resolution might be excessive. There is surely unity; its main unifying theme is the opposition reciprocity-

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<sup>133</sup> In their entry to *Gautreks Saga*, Pulsiano et al. (1990) also suggest *Króka-Refs* saga might belong to this group. While the theme of clever gifting is present in that story, is not as central in the narrative as in these two.

<sup>134</sup> At least according to William Miller (Miller 2007: footnote 1). The ÍF edition only uses the main *Morkinskinna* and *Flateyjarbók* manuscripts, and we follow the same procedure.

<sup>135</sup> Chesnutt (2009) adds that without the *Vikars þáttir* (only present in the long redaction) the whole *Gautreks saga* might be regarded as part of the *exempla* genre.

<sup>136</sup> Ashman Rowe finds it a “humoristic parallel to *Auðunar þáttir vestfirzka*” and considers it at probably derived from it, without further explanations on why (1998: 161). As for Ciklamini, for her we are dealing with a parable and therefore with Christian values, especially *Caritas*, but read through an Icelandic reading of it, associated with the idea of “good luck”. She believes that “we can understand this in a spiritual sense” (Ashman Rowe 1998: 163).

<sup>137</sup> The literature on gifting is vast, and while it is mostly associated with anthropology and with the name of Marcel Mauss, it has also been widely used by sociologists (like Caillé 2000), historians (like Iogna-Prat 1988, Wickham 2005), and even philosophers (Derrida 1991). In Scandinavian studies it has been a fruitful approach, especially in the last three decades. While its origin in the field are ancient (Claude Cahen's *La Libation*, Grønbech's *Vor Folkat I Oldtiden*, and Mauss's *Essai* itself), the bulk of works using this anthropological vocabulary are from the last three decades (f.ex., the works of Hastrup, Byock, Miller, Vestergaard, Samson, Durrenberger, etc.).

miserliness (Cronan<sup>138</sup> 2007: 82. See also Ashman-Rowe 1998), and Durrenberger clearly points towards that direction. Taking that into account, it is hard not to see Refr as an illustration on the way to prosper in society by gifting (a similar reading in Cronan 2007: 88), maybe with a cynic down-to-earth exemplarity that exists in other Norse sources<sup>139</sup>. That then seems to be “dressed up” in the splendour of old and distant past frequent in *fornaldarsögur*, especially in what concerns the Scandinavian monarchies which medieval Icelandic elites proudly imagined themselves to be connected with, as “mange af sagaernes hovedpersoner var forfædre til en sener generation af islendinge”<sup>140</sup> (Sverrir Jakobsson 2003: 226-228).

Durrenberger also sees the story as an exploration on a principle which would have become available to Icelanders as a literary theme only after it ceased to be the dominant principle in society with the submission to the Norwegian crown in 1262 (Durrenberger 1982: 26). This is rather dubious. First because the presence of *Auðunar þáttur*, totally ignored by the author, of which there is no doubt that pre-dates the end of the commonwealth by at least several decades. Second, because the idea that societies can only write about what is no longer socially dominant is plainly absurd. If so, no *speculum regale* could have been the by-product of the central middle ages, nor a *Das Kapital* could have been written in nineteenth-century Europe, to choose a few of a potentially endless list of examples. Third, because the idea of a drastic change in social relationships after the *gámli sáttmáli* has been put in doubt by recent scholars, which prefer to see a long process of accumulation of power and establishment of dominions where force at least coexisted (if not replaced: See Orri Vésteinsson 2007) with reciprocity as a dominant principle (Jón Víðar Sigurðsson 1999. With less emphasis on force, Byock 2001), not to mention the presence of a power factor (the Church) which acted as a power on its own. The historical picture is more complex than the schematic approach Durrenberger establishes.

Yet his article opened a very interesting question on the effects the social changes of the thirteenth century could have had in the narratives about gift-giving produced in medieval Iceland. Considering the slender amount of texts which are directly devoted to this (our two *þáttir*), to draw a general conclusion from them would be excessive: our aim will be, at best, to propose a possible trend. We will return later to that problem; as a first analytical step, we need to briefly summarize<sup>141</sup> both texts focusing on the circulation of gifts.

### **Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka**

In this tale the structure of gifting begins with Auðunn<sup>142</sup> spending all his resources on a trip to Greenland, where he buys a (polar?) bear, which he plans to give to the King of Denmark as a gift. But first he reaches Norway. The Norwegian king hears about the bear, asks him to buy it for what it costs, and later for twice that amount, but Auðunn answers that it is for the king of Denmark so he cannot sell it. The Norwegian king threateningly reminds him of the enmity between him and the Danish one, and that the travel would be unsafe. Auðunn goes on, but promises the king to come back and tell how he was rewarded. A complication appears when he runs totally out of cash, so he is forced to sell to a retainer of the Danish king half the bear to feed it and himself, but he finally reaches Sveinn, king of the Danes.

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<sup>138</sup> Cronan’s article is extremely deep, and uses a fruitful mixture of literary and anthropological ideas. Our approach emphasizes the social aspect, while he emphasizes the literary. With a few core disagreements, in general our approach is non-contradicting but supplementary to his.

<sup>139</sup> The first part of *Hávamál* (the so-called *Gesta þáttur*, stanzas 1-80.) is the most obvious example.

<sup>140</sup> Interestingly, Refr is not said to be the ancestor of any Icelander (as Auðunn is). This marks that the genealogically relevant figures in the tale are the aristocrats.

<sup>141</sup> The procedure of synthesizing the gift-schemes as a first analytical step was already used by Fichtner (1979). His article later goes into considering *Auðunar þáttur* as depicting an initiation ritual, an idea that is intriguing but maybe far-fetched.

<sup>142</sup> In the *Flateyjarbók* version he is said to be a poor farmhand, but with a talent for commercial activities (*Flateyjarbók* III: 410-415). These early scenes of him as a farmhand and trader are not present in the oldest version.

Sveinn is angry with his retainer, as he risked the chance to get the gift from Auðunn, but is glad with Auðunn for the gift itself and because he spent all his money on it and invites him to stay at court. Auðunn accepts and stays for some time, and then leaves for a pilgrimage to Rome, with a gift of silver from the king. But he runs into a stroke of bad luck, and comes back to Denmark in tatters, so he thinks he cannot present himself in front of the king (who appears dressed in full splendour) because his retainers are drunk and will be aggressive towards him. But the king sees him, and while his warriors laugh at the pathetic appearance of Auðunn, he praises his deed and gives him hospitality. Then the king offers him the position of cup-bearer, but Auðunn rejects it, saying he needs to take care of his mother, who is poor in Iceland. The king then accepts, and repays the bear with an outfitted ship, but he also gives him a bag of silver and an arm-ring for him to show he has seen King Sveinn, but advises not to give the arm-ring except to repay a very noble man.

He then arrives back in Norway, where the king asks him about how Sveinn repaid him. Auðunn answers “by accepting my gift”. The king insists, and Auðunn tells of the money for the pilgrimage, later about the offer to be a cup-bearer, then about the ship and cargo, then about the silver. The Norwegian king says he himself would have considered himself free of obligations at that point, and asks if something else was given. Auðunn tells of the arm-ring, and the conditions put on it. So he gives the king the arm-ring, to repay him for pardoning his life and that of the bear while travelling. The king accepts, and later gives him gifts<sup>143</sup> when he leaves for Iceland, where it is said he was considered very lucky<sup>144</sup>.

### Gjafa-Refs þátr

The tale starts telling of Jarl Neri, a Norwegian magnate who is both a wise and unable to accept gifts, as he did not want to return counter gifts. Immediately, we are told about a farmer called Rennir, who was previously presented in the saga as a settled farmer in good relationships with Víkarr<sup>145</sup>. We are also told that Rennir had a son, a stereotypical coal-biter called Refr, and a very valuable and ornamented ox, which was the best in the district. Rennir expels his lazy son from his house. Refr accepts, but asks him for his most valuable possession, which Rennir grants him for the sake of his departure. Refr takes the ox, and goes to visit Jarl Neri. His retainers mock Refr, but the Jarl chastises them from doing it. His doorkeeper insists Refr is just a peasant, but the Jarl receives him anyway.

Refr offers him the ox, and as Neri says he never accepts gifts not to counter-gift, Refr says he does not need anything but advice<sup>146</sup>. So Neri accepts, invites Refr to sleep in his residence, washes him and dresses him properly. Then he gives him an impressive shield from his vast collection. But the Jarl later complains that if he receives more gifts, he will lose all his shields (as counter-gifts). Refr hears this and offers him the shield back as he does not need it, lacking other weapons. Neri accepts, gives him a whetstone, and sends him to King Gautrekr, specifying the conditions in which Gautrekr will need it (when hunting) and will counter-gift it. He then instructs him to come back after he receives the counter-gift.

Refr goes to see Gautrekr, and he gets a gold ring for the whetstone, which was used by him as Neri predicted. He brings it back to Neri, spends the winter with him, and thinks about selling the ring. Neri intervenes, and sends him to an English king, ordering to offer him the ring, and coming back. He does and gives the ring while wearing fine clothes and weapons (we

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<sup>143</sup> A splendid pair of sword and cloak, in the *Flateyjarbók* version (*Flateyjarbók* III: 415), but unspecified in *Morkinskinna*.

<sup>144</sup> The tale ends with the name of a descendent, Þorsteinn Gyðuson, a prominent farmer in Flatey according to Sturlunga, who died in 1190. This could explain its inclusion in *Flateyjarbók*.

<sup>145</sup> King of Agder and Jaederen, Hordaland, Hardanger and some other Norwegian districts, because he was one of his warriors during his career to ascend as a king. He later dies, and his inheritors are his two sons. Neri is one of them.

<sup>146</sup> Which is a (subsidiary) counter-gift, and ends up being quite an important one. Failing to recognize this, Durrenberger (1982:35) sees the whetstone gift (which only matters if seen together with the good advice) as “absurd”. In fact, the wise advice later shows up as setting the grounds for the other kings to behave as no less than Gautrekr, who exchanged gold for stone. But the counter gift stone given by Neri is not the same as the gift given from Refr to Gautrekr, as the advice is not transferred but stays with Refr.



are not said where they came from). The English king offers him hospitality, but he only accepts a short stay, saying he has to go back to “his foster father, Jarl Neri”. He gets then a fully equipped and loaded ship as a counter-gift, as the English king compares his generosity to that of Gautrekr, who gave gold for stone. The king also gives him two impressive dogs.

Refr comes back to Neri, and is invited to stay and eat there. He says he has money to pay, but of course the Jarl invites him, as “it is not too much to pay for the ox”. Then he stays again with Neri, who this time sends him to see Hrólfr Kraki in Denmark, and gives him the exceptional dogs. Refr accepts, though he adds that he is already wealthy.

Refr travels to offer Hrólfr the dogs, and tells the history of his exchange, and the one with Gautrekr. The king praises Gautrekr, and gives him another ship, a helmet and a coat of mail. After a short stay, he then leaves again for Neri, who offers again hospitality as a small repayment. He then sends him to a plundering king, called Ólafr, and says to him to give him the chainmail and the helmet, and to choose as a reward to be allowed to command his forces for a night, which should be taken into Neri’s dominions, and beware Refr of Ólafr’s advisor, Nose-Refr.

Refr then offers the gifts, and tells their story. But Ólafr asks his advisor if he should accept them, and gets a negative answer from him. Then Nose-Refr gets the gifts and jumps to the sea. Gift-Refr recovers the chainmail, but Nose-Refr disappears with the helmet. Then, Refr offers the armour to the king, who now accepts, and lets him choose a reward. Refr says as Neri told him. They meet, and now he tells Refr of a plan he has to marry him to the daughter of Gautrekr. By a clever trick, he makes Refr threaten him and Gautrekr with an invasion, and offers him a settlement, praising his lineage. He offers him land, and Gautrekr’s daughter. Refr is then given lands, the girl, and the status of a Jarl.

Then Gautrekr discovers the trick, but he keeps his oath. Neri then says he has repaid him but not enough, as Refr had given all he had, and Neri keeps always being very wealthy. The tale ends with the wedding feast, a last praise on Gautrekr’s generosity and of Refr’s quickness and lineage.

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A comparison between both stories reveals major similarities and significant differences. In both cases, the protagonists give a luxury good<sup>147</sup>, in one case made exotic by ornamentation and quality of the specimen, and in the other, by the exotic kind of good. Moreover, this gift is a major portion of the total belongings of the givers. The combination of a magnificent, royal-like gift with its overgenerous outlook explains the royal-like and overgenerous outlook of the counter-gifts offered by the receivers, and their inability to reject them, which is stressed for Neri, who is explicitly said to reject gifts on the premises he does not want to repay (*Aldri vildi hann gjafir þiggja, því at hann var svá sínker, at hann tímði engu at launa*, Grþ:30<sup>148</sup>. He never wanted to receive gifts, because he was so stingy, that he grudged counter-gifting. ).

The obligation to repay, which is both the most prominent element of the theory of the gift and is directly voiced in Old Norse sources<sup>149</sup> is here paired with agonistic features. This gifting is *competitive* and places the parts involved in a scale of liberality and so establishes (or confirms?) a hierarchy of ascending status associated with it. Both Auðunn and Refr understand the underlying logics of competitive gifting, and use them on their behalf. The powerful men which receive the

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<sup>147</sup> The fact that it in both cases the gift is an animal (one domestic, the other wild) seems not to be particularly relevant, with the exception on the difficulties faced by Auðunn to feed the animal, and the short subplot created from this, whose function is to assert the superiority of kingly rights over those of their subjects.

<sup>148</sup> We quote *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* as Grþ., followed with the page number in the cited edition of Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda. In the same vein, Aþv. refers to *Auðunnar þáttur vestfirzka*, which is quoted from the ÍF edition. The quotations from the *Flatejarbók* version are quoted as *Flatejarbók III*, and the corresponding page numbers. All translations are ours.

<sup>149</sup> *Hávamál* (*Vín sínóm skal maðr vinn vera / oc gjalta gjöf með gjöf*. To his friend a man a friend should be and pay gift with gift. *Hávamál* 42:23), *Gísla Saga* (*sér a gjöf til gjalda*. A gift looks for itself to be paid, 15:52). *Hugsvinnsmál*, the Icelandic version of *Disticha Catonis*, echoes the same idea (*gjaltu gjöf við gjöf*. Pay gift with gift, 8:3), but does so more in accordance with *Hávamál* than with the Latin original, which refers to loans instead of gifts (McKinnell 2007: 83).

gifts, on the other hand, also have reasons to accept them and give back, as it will increase their reputations. But they have fewer margins for choice, as the decision of not paying back would have been negative towards their status. A status which, in turn, is what builds (part) of their ability to command effectively other people, and thus, to remain themselves as powerful men (See Sahlins 2004 [1974], esp. chapter 3).

Another relevant and recurrent element in both narratives is the passage of time between the first gift and the counter-gift. This takes the form of minor, subsidiary gifts<sup>150</sup> which function as marks of a expected future counter-gift. These take the form of silver, advice, clothes. But it especially takes the shape of hospitality, which implies shelter, food and drink, but also a stay in the retinue of the king and through it expanded sociability.

This widening of social ties contributes significantly to the rise in prestige of the guest, and seems to have provided him with a name on this upper social milieu, even beyond the local court. For example, when Refr reaches the kingdom of Denmark, he presents himself as Refr, but king Hrólfr asks if he is the one called Gift-Refr. Refr says he has both given and received gift from men (Grþ:36)<sup>151</sup>. There is a change in his nickname which evidences a rising social status; he was previously called, by Neri's retainers, Refr *Rennisfjll*, (Refr the idiot (son) of Rennir. Grþ:31). Both tales illustrate how these communications of status associated to generosity happened, as there are recurrent questions on how the gifts were counter-given, associated with assessments of the generosity of the counter-gift. In fact, the reasons for the inclusion of Gjafa-Refr in *Gautreks saga* might rest in an attempt to praise the generosity of the king (Cronan 2007: 84), but maybe also to put some shade of doubt on his intelligence. Immediately before the end of the *þáttr*, the author assesses Gautrekr:

Var hann meir ágætr at örleik sínum ok framgöngu, en eigi er þat sagt, at hann væri djúpvitr, en þó var hann vinsæll ok stórgjöffull ok inn hæverskligasti at sjá (Grþ. 41)

[He was more famous at his liberality and exploits, but it is not said, that he was deeply wise, but nevertheless he was blessed with friends and greatly munificent, and the most courteous to see.]

The scene where a nobleman is impressed by his gift of gold for stone points in the same direction, and is repeated in his encounters with kings Ella (Grþ. 34) and Hrólfr (Grþ.36), with the formula *Mikit er um örleik slíkra konunga, er hann gefr gull við grjóti* (Great is in liberality such a king, that he gives gold for stone). The formula changes its second half to emphasize Gautreks generosity on Refr's meeting with King Ólafr *Mikit er um örleik slíkra konunga, ok berr Gautrekr konungr þó yfir þeira örleik allra* (Great is in liberality such a king, but King Gautrekr bears nevertheless over all the others in liberality, Grþ:38).

The same communication of reputation occurs when the Norwegian king evaluates the generosity of King Sveinn after talking with Auðunn. Even if both kings are enemies, the generosity of Sveinn is praised by king Haraldr, which qualifies Sveinn's counter-gifting as *stórmannligt* ("magnificent"<sup>152</sup>, Aþv. 368).

Both stories also end with the main characters rising in prestige in a permanent way and leaving in abundance. This is one of the main exemplary elements: the authors are explaining how generosity in giving is a key for upwards social mobility, and could be complemented by stories which represent greedy hoarders as social failures; those range from the realistically rendered protagonist of *Hænsa-Þóris saga*<sup>153</sup>, to the mythic monstrosity of *Fáfñir*<sup>154</sup>. The link made between prestige with

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<sup>150</sup> The idea of subsidiary gifts goes back to Malinowsky (1978 [1922]). Especially relevant to the problem is the discussion of the Polynesian *mapula* (small gifts) by Weiner (1992:25-28).

<sup>151</sup> The sociability in *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* is exclusively between males. *Auðunnar þáttr* barely mentions the tie between the protagonist and his mother, but on all other aspects is also part of a male-controlled environment.

<sup>152</sup> The translation into English seems to lose the precise meaning. Magnificent refers to the *action* being done as great, while *stórmannligt* refers to the *man* doing the action as great (as opposed to *lítilmannligt*).

<sup>153</sup> On *Hænsa-þórir* and his depiction, both in anthropological and literary terms, see Durrenberger et al. 1989.

gifting is everywhere in the corpus, and these tales illustrate it in a systematic way. The differences in genre between *Auðunnar þáttur* (which is close in style to the *konunga-* or *Íslendingasögur*) and *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* (which clearly belongs in the *fornaldarsögur*<sup>155</sup>) explain some of these differences. As Chesnutt (2009) has noted, the expanded repetitions of the episodes in the gift cycle (give, receive, and counter-give) are related to the narrative style<sup>156</sup>. From an anthropological point of view, most episodes in *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* bear the same message, and the story will not be different if the kings of England, Norway and Denmark would have been placed in another order, or even if two of them were suppressed. That threefold repetition, which is lacking in *Auðunnar þáttur*, reinforces the main messages shared between both tales: Generosity is the key value to become a great man; To receive and to repay gifts is mandatory; Great men are always givers, but smaller man can also be, and prosper.

### **Difference: Ideology.**

Nevertheless, there are some differences in the ideology expressed by the tales, even if they share similar basic meanings and similar episodes. Those differences appear in subtler expressions, which seem not to have been necessarily put on the forefront by the authors. Consequently, their exemplary value could be doubted. They appear mostly through comparison, and we have no sure way to know if the author of the later tale (with all probability *Gjafa-Refs þáttur*) had the other story in mind when composing his own, or even if he knew any version of it.

In recent years<sup>157</sup>, anthropologists working at a theoretical level on gift-exchange went back to an overlooked element in the Maussian *Essai*, which commented (and did not elaborate on) the idea that some special goods were never given, as were considered inalienable. After the work of Weiner (1992), Godelier (2002) called attention that these separated goods were present in many societies, and that they set the background which enabled the gift-giving logics to operate.

Part of this idea already appeared in one of the earliest essays on gift-giving for medieval Scandinavia, written by the soviet historian Aron Gurevich, which related the concepts of nobility, (landed) property and freedom through the concept of *óðal* (Gurevich 1992 [1968]: 177-178). While he failed to acknowledge that this concept never existed in Iceland, there is legal evidence that inheritance of land property was conceived as linked to families even after actual alienations (Byock 2001: 270-271). The contrast between both *þáttir* seems to show that the distinction between alienable and inalienable possessions may also emerge in narrative sources.

While it is true that both Refr and Auðunn benefit both materially and socially for their gift strategies, the position they achieve in the end is totally different. Refr becomes part of the nobility and earns the dignity of Jarl. Auðunn becomes a rich farmer. If we followed a purely materialistic reading of the episodes, this could had been attributed to a difference in the value<sup>158</sup> between both gifts, which would imply (following potlatch-like logics) also a difference in the value of counter-gifts; Auðunn's bear was a luxurious, extremely expensive item, and Refr just had a high-quality, and highly ornamented common

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<sup>154</sup> As depicted both in Eddic poetry and *Völsunga saga*. On Fáfnir's hoarding, Vestergaard (1991: 53) appropriately comments "denne vågen over skatten er en afvisning af alle sociale relationer og alliancer", and ties it with the same kind of logics in the origin of Ragnarøk; end of exchange, implies end of social ties, and that leads to social destruction (although in a much bigger, "cosmic", scale).

<sup>155</sup> Even if it never reaches the levels of fantasy appearing in some examples of the genre: the tale still speaks about realistic characters, and is doubtful it could have been understood as pure entertainment.

<sup>156</sup> Following this line, we avoid making arguments on the repetition of the gift-cycle as determinant in the outcome of the tales of Refr and Auðunn. We consider it an example of the folk-like use of threefold repetition as a literary device in the *fornaldarsögur*.

<sup>157</sup> This short excursus aims to set the background for the analysis of difference between the texts as explained below.

<sup>158</sup> Here by "value" we mean the *perceived* value, and not the value in terms of time or labour spent on producing the item.

animal. But the counter-gifts obtained by Refr are quite more valuable. Moreover, his position is *at the same time* enhanced, as his social distance to the magnates is shortened, not increased<sup>159</sup>.

Auðunn, on the other hand, receives less while he has given the same (or more), and the only position he is offered (but refuses) is a position in the retinue (as a *skutilsveinn*, a kind of page or table assistant<sup>160</sup>. Aþv: 366). But the social, more than the economic, quality of the opening gift is what differs in each case. This meaningful difference is seen in the way Auðunn and Refr acquire their animals:

Þess er við getit, at Auðunn kaupir þar bjarndýri eitt, gersimi mikla, ok gaf þar fyrir alla eigu sína. (Aþv: 361)  
[it was said, that Auðunn bought there one wild bear, a big treasure, and gave there for it all he owned]

On the other hand, when Rennir, Refr's father expels him, Refr answers:

“Með því attu rekr mik frá þér, þá mun þat makligrá, at fári sá gripr med mér, er þú átt beztan ok þér þykkir mest at láta.”  
Rennir mælti: “Engi gripr er sá í minni eign, at ek vilda eigi til þess gefa, at ek sæja þik aldri, því at þú ert athlægi ættar þinnar”  
(Grþ: 31)  
[“Since you drive me away from you, then it is fitting, to take away this thing with me, that you have as the best and think the most valuable” Rennir said “Nothing is in my property that I will not give to not see you again, because you are the laughing-stock of your family”]

If we look at the vocabulary used, the ox is *given* from father to son in the second case. And there is no expectation of any counter-gift: Rennir explicitly wants never to see Refr again, as in fact happens. Refr finds it “fitting” or “deserved” and the explanation for it is that he is claiming it as inheritance. The emphasis put on kinship in this dialogue is totally absent from the commercial tone of the other account. We are told that Auðunn buys a bear using all his riches, and what is praised about the bear is its material value, which is assessed impersonally, as an objective quality of the bear. This is rather different in the first description of the ox, which is explicitly said to be highly valued by Rennir, who devotes attention and efforts to keep it as precious. It was an impressive animal by both its quality *and* the effort Rennir put on it<sup>161</sup> (Grþ. 24). Both will become gifts, but in the origin we are dealing with a pure commodity on one hand and on the other with a specific treasure, tied to men and inheritance.

*Gjafa-Refs þátr* seems to confirm the ideological emphasis on lineage while it mentions -for the first time- the grandfather of Refr as part of the stratagem jarl Neri uses to present Refr as a viable match for King Gautrek's daughter. Neri judges the demand fitting *Því at ríkr jarl var móðurfaðir þinn, en faðir þinn öruggur kappi* (Because your maternal grandfather was a *ríkr jarl*, but your father a bold warrior, Grþ: 40). The adjective *ríkr* means both “mighty, powerful” and “rich”, the second meaning appearing in the late thirteenth century by analogy with continental and British use, according to Cleasby-Vígfússon; i. e. around the time where the saga seems to have been composed, leaving the precise meaning obscure or (maybe) as implying a connection between both.

Gautrekr accepts the argument, and it could be regarded then as a ruse by Neri, implying that clever lying was also a conceivable way for social advance. But later the tale narrator seems to confirm the sayings of Neri:

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<sup>159</sup> As it will be expected if we were following competitive gift logics in the ideal form.

<sup>160</sup> Cleasby-Vígfússon's dictionary notices that the figure was introduced in the Norwegian courts during the rule of Ólafr the silent (in the second half of the eleventh century), and it is common in the twelfth and thirteenth century. This is consistent with the tale, which mentions the figure in the court of Sveinn Úlfsson, which is only slightly earlier and a contemporary of Ólafr's predecessor, Harald Harðráði (the king of Norway in the tale). This places the story c.1050.

<sup>161</sup> This connects with the idea, central to the theories on the gift, that something from the possessor is present in the possessions.

Þar með gaf Gautrekr konungur honum jarls nafn, ok þótti inn frægasti at öllum vaskleik, var ok ætt hans af tígnum mönnum, en faðir hans inn mesti víkingr og kappi.

[There also king Gautrekr gave to him the title of Jarl, and he was thought the most famous in quickness<sup>162</sup>. His family was also of men of rank, but his father was the best viking and champion. Grþ:41]

This maternal grandfather of Refr seems to appear from nowhere. When Rennir was presented, the only thing said about his wife is the laconic assertion that he was married to her (*Konu átti hann sér*, Grþ: 23). He is in the same paragraph described as a *ríkr bóndi*, and has good relationship with the king Víkarr, who is Neri's father (Grþ: 20). This explains why Refr chose to visit him after being expelled, and points to a connection between both families. The same is true for the adjective used to describe him; if he was only meant to be wealthy, but of no lineage at all, *auðmaðr* could have been used instead. It was used, for example, to describe the *parvenu* Þórir (Hænsa-Þóris saga, 1:6), a man who had no relevant family ties. And *ríkr* is, as we have seen, the same adjective used to describe this supposed grandfather. So it seems logical to suspect that, even if Neri might have been boasting up Refr's lineage, he was (at worst) exaggerating what was already present. The insistence of Neri to welcome him against the mockery of his retinue towards Refr also points towards the same direction.

On the other hand, Auðunn is a nobody. His social ties are with traders and a poor mother. We know nothing about his father nor any other ancestor, and there is an element of pity and humillity in him (on his return scene from the pilgrimage; Aþv: 365) that is absent in Refr, and this element (plus kingly virtue) is associated with the reasons Sveinn has to welcome him after the pilgrimage. He is, nevertheless, special and far from average, as was thought to be the luckiest man (*þótti vera inn mesti gæfumaðr*, Aþv:368). Luck<sup>163</sup> seems to have been seen as an inborn quality (Hallberg 1973), but could be reverted into bad luck by specific negative actions (Sejberg Sommer 2007: 291-293). Auðunn had it from the beginning, yet we also see him avoid making mistakes. There is an element of personal quality that makes his given luck fruitful.

But the lucky Auðunn is never given the status the also lucky (Grþ:37) Refr gets. Lineage plays here a determinant role, as is the only thing that distinguishes the generally analogous behaviour of both characters. Neri's relationship with Refr (which is called *fóstri*, a form of kinship by alliance. Grþ: 36, 39, 40) goes deeper than the protection kings Sveinn and Haraldr give to Auðunn, but stems from a shared asset, family ties, which cannot be obtained by personal ability; it is a resource that is, at best, obtained after generations (through marriage), and leads to lasting changes in status. Both tales share the common message "great men are always givers, but smaller man can also be, and prosper", but *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* adds "yet, small men can only become big through giving if there is already some greatness in their ancestry", an element which is neither present nor contradicted by *Auðunar þáttur*.

This is in contradiction with the conclusion reached by Cronan, who argues that "the saga concludes by presenting a new model of giving, one that can absorb and include the competitive reciprocity of aristocrats but which is open to all and which enables everyone to flourish through its affirmation of community, social mobility, and the selfless guidance of the young." (Cronan 2007: 123). This "new model", with Christian echoes, is contrasted to an old model (from the early part of the saga, *Dalafjfl þáttur*), of a pagan world which is presented as ruled by malevolent gods who exact all they can from their worshippers (Cronan 2007: 121). On one hand, this view does not recognize that Refr is more than a simple ash lad, as the reasons for

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<sup>162</sup> The translation of Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards translates the passage in a very different way "Everybody thought Refr a very enterprising fellow" (1985: 170). The key word here is *vaskleikr*, which Fritzner renders as *raskhed* (celerity, quickness). Zöega follows Cleasby, with "bravery, valour". The substantive seems to derive from the adjective *raskr*, which is translated consistently as "rask" (quick) by Fritzner, and as "manly, valiant" by Zöega and Cleasby (who adds it has uncertain etymology). My translation follows Fritzner, as there seem to be no reason to qualify Refr as particularly manly nor valiant, except by stock figures of praise (or irony). In any case, a connection between "quick" (or "manly") and "enterprising" seems to be far fetched.

<sup>163</sup> Incidentally of the vocabulary of luck is etymologically related to the words for "gift". It might be associated with the idea that luck is a gift from superior powers (Sejberg Sommer 279, 282), but there maybe other aspects on it.

his social mobility are in part grounded on his background. On the other, the guidance of Neri is hardly selfless, as it also provides him with praise and prestige. Crucially, it seems not to have been a matter of choice, but forced on Neri by the logics of competitive gifting and the risk of being qualified as a miser. Finally, these ideas can hardly be qualified “new”, as the considerably older *Auðunar þáttur* already presented them<sup>164</sup>.

In this way, the aforementioned ideas of Gurevich about a long-term link between some inherited, inalienable quality and the strategies of gift-giving seem to be confirmed, even if not in detail. This way we return to the question on the effects the social changes of the Icelandic thirteenth century might have had in the narratives about gift-giving.

### **A development in the ideology of power-building?**

The contradictions, or at least differences in emphasis by the values concerning gifting upheld in both tales are harmonic to the changes Icelandic society undertook between the composition of both. In the rough half century separating them<sup>165</sup>, the process of accumulation of power in the hands of a small number of families came to an end; civil conflict became bigger, and territorial dominions finally replaced personal ties as the dominant form of organization. This process involved also a foreign faction, represented by the Norwegian crown, which ends up as the “big winner” with the agreements of 1262-1264, which led to the formation of an aristocracy of service in the fourteenth century (On the service aristocracy, see Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1995).

The crucial point is that power did not change hands in terms of local matters, as the families of big chieftains kept most power (and offices) after the transition. We are not witnessing the replacement of an old aristocracy with newcomers. Moreover, the involvement of the Norwegian monarchs in its daily matters was probably far from pervasive given the rather peripheral nature of Iceland.

Accordingly, the difference in ideology between both *þáttir* is not radical, as both probably stem from the same literate groups at the top of the Icelandic social scale, the ones with particular interest in showing links with the Scandinavian monarchs. The old romantic notion of Icelanders being anti-monarchic, proto-democratic freedom lovers should be discarded, and more so for the upper layers of society, constantly worried with the prestige granted by contacts with both royal and ecclesiastical power.

Yet, we are dealing in both cases with narratives of aristocracies that are open, where social mobility exists, and is positively assessed. The unimpressive lineage of Auðunn (or, better his total lack of it) poses no barrier for him to become a noteworthy ancestor for some of the families in the west-fjords area, as the last paragraph of the tale asserts. There is no objection, nor any narrative device is used to provide Auðunn with illustrious ancestors; we are dealing with a society that still accepted social mobility (at least in the past) through luck, perseverance and intelligence as possible. But a society that also emphasized the difference in power and magnitude between common people and kings in favour of the monarchs. And it also emphasized the benefits that link provides for the former, much in the same fashion that historical ascending Icelanders of the early thirteenth century behaved themselves.

Sixty or so years after that, *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* is harmonic with a society, in which social mobility is (or should be presented as) stagnant. The chaotic –but full of opportunities for clever manoeuvring– times of the early thirteenth century were replaced with a context where the root of ultimate worldly authority is clear and undisputed. To use a historical example, even while they struggled against the unpopularity of the law code *Jarnsida*, the Icelanders were not aiming for avoiding overlordship

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<sup>164</sup> And there, in fact, the reasons for the king of Norway to protect Auðunn might have some degree of selflessness; Christian values are in general far more evident there than in *Gjafa-Refs*.

<sup>165</sup> These arguments rest on the conventional composition dates of c.1220 for *Morkinskinna*, and c.1280 for *Gautreks Saga*. They will not change if *Auðunar þáttur* is somewhat older or slightly younger, or if *Gjafa-Refs þáttur* is slightly younger or somewhat later. A late *Auðunar þáttur* (for example, near the date of the *Morkinskinna* manuscript) or an early *Gjafa-Refs* will obviously nullify them.

anymore in the 1270's. Moreover, its replacement by the also not popular (but closer to Icelandic ideas about law) *Jónsbók* in 1281 was also enforced by the king, and it settled the issue (Byock 2001: 352). Is in that context where the perspective of *Gjafa-Refs þáttr* on lineage is displayed, presenting a more closed pattern of social mobility. Both texts could be read as complementary and basically harmonic: one tells how far a commoner could climb in the social scale, the other how far an important farmer could. The difference is in which tale each era preferred to tell.

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