

Feuding in Viking-Age  
Iceland's  
Great Village

Jesse L. Byock

in

CONFLICT IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE  
*Changing Perspective on Society and Culture*

Ashgate Publishing Co.

2003

Jesse Byock. "Feuding in Viking Age Iceland's Great Village." In *Conflict in Medieval Europe: Changing Perspectives on Society and Culture*. Eds. Warren C. Brown and Piotr Górecki. Aldershot: Ashgate, (2003), pp. 229-241.

## Chapter 12

Feuding in Viking-Age Iceland's  
Great Village

Jesse L. Byock

Medieval Iceland, with its vast saga literature and extensive law books, has long supplied researchers with examples of conflict and feud. It is now a century since the legal historian James Bryce wrote that medieval Iceland was

a community whose culture and creative power flourished independently of any favouring material conditions, and indeed under conditions in the highest degree unfavourable. Nor ought it to be less interesting to the student of politics and laws as having produced a Constitution unlike any other whereof records remain, and a body of law so elaborate and complex that it *is* hard to believe that it existed among men whose chief occupation was to kill one another.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the eloquence of Lord Bryce's formulation, his last line is patently wrong. The chief occupation of early Icelanders was not to kill one another. To the contrary, Viking Age Icelanders only killed in moderation. Whatever the desire of individuals for vengeance, Icelanders as a society were principally concerned with finding workable compromises that avoided recourse to violence. Most studies of blood taking and peace making in early Iceland have rather determinedly followed Bryce's lead. Analyses of Icelandic feuding have tended to focus on the details of wonderfully narrated incidents of saga blood letting, that is, crisis situations on which the sagas dote, rather than on distinguishing underlying societal structures and normative patterns that held violence in check. In this article I shift the focus away from the homicidal aspects of Icelandic feuding and instead reconsider the dynamic of feud and conflict resolution in light of the organizational structures that evolved in this community of medieval European immigrants.

My premise is that we come closest to understanding early Icelanders through a two-pronged approach: on the one hand, by focusing on their well-documented perception of themselves as a community and, on the

<sup>1</sup> James Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence*, 2 vols. (1901; repr. Freeport, 1968), 1:263.

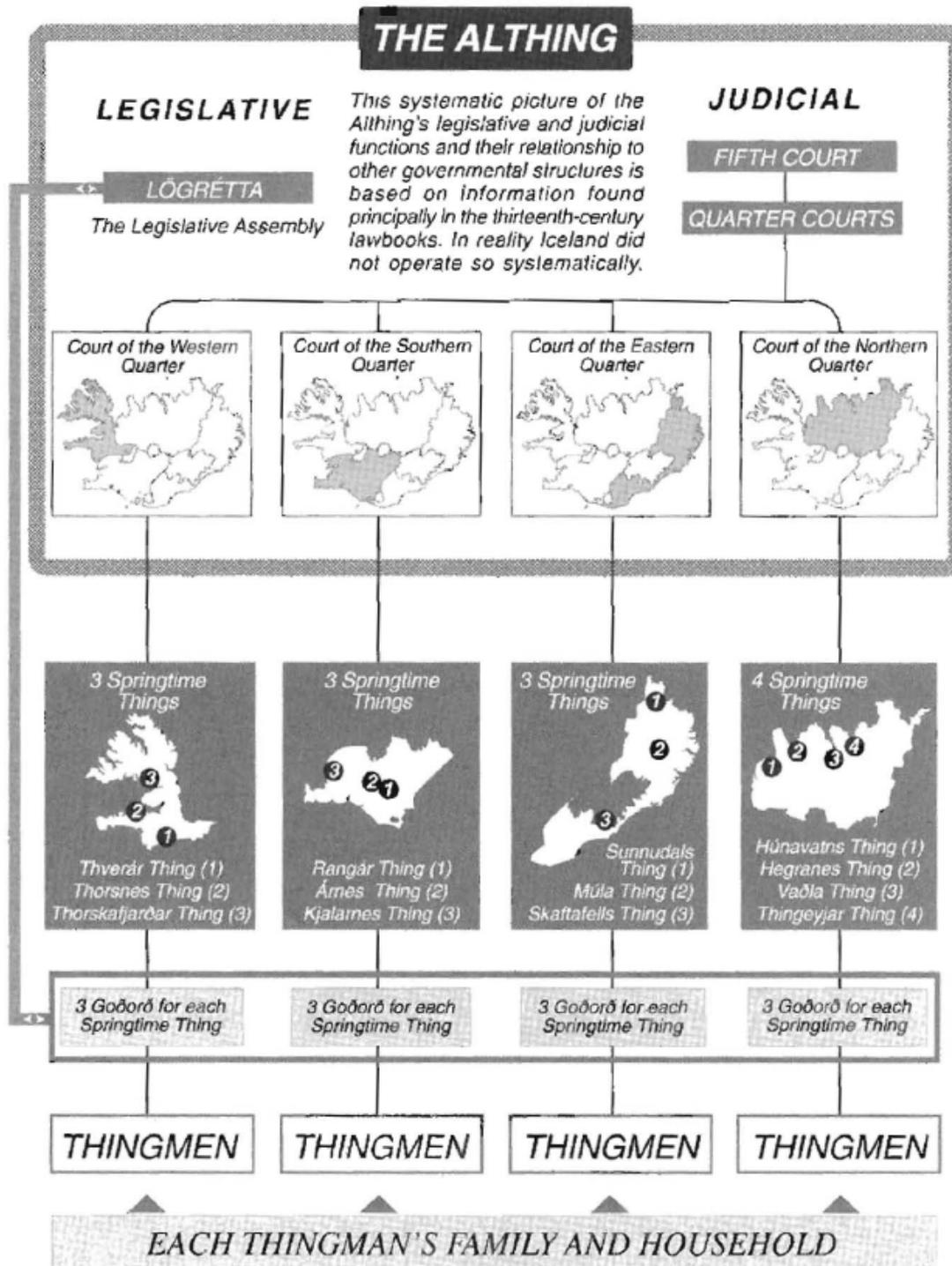
other hand, through anthropological and historical analyses of the forces that shaped this perception. The cultural and ecological setting in Viking Age Iceland gave individuals an incentive to keep the peace. Peer pressure, demanding moderation and consensus, emerged as a potent force in Icelandic politics because Icelanders lived in what might be called a "great village society."

The conscious sense of community that underlay the great village nature of early Icelandic society has been rather overlooked by scholars, yet the pieces are all there for assembling the deepened understanding of early Iceland that this concept offers. The island was a single but dispersed community of farms around the coast and in a few inland valley systems. Socially it was a spread-out, village-like environment that shared common judicial and legislative institutions. The different quarters of Iceland were united by strong ties of interdependence. Within each quarter the subsistence of each household relied on economic cooperation. Iceland is a large land mass. It is two-thirds the size of England and Scotland combined, and 25 percent larger than Ireland. The mother culture, Viking Age Scandinavia, was a society of regional groupings and warlords. Although there was plenty of opportunity in Iceland for warlords, petty kingdoms, and antagonistic tribal arrangements to develop, they did not.<sup>2</sup> Instead, bonding networks that provided stabilization and were compromise-prone took precedence, unifying Iceland into a cohesive and flexible island-wide community.

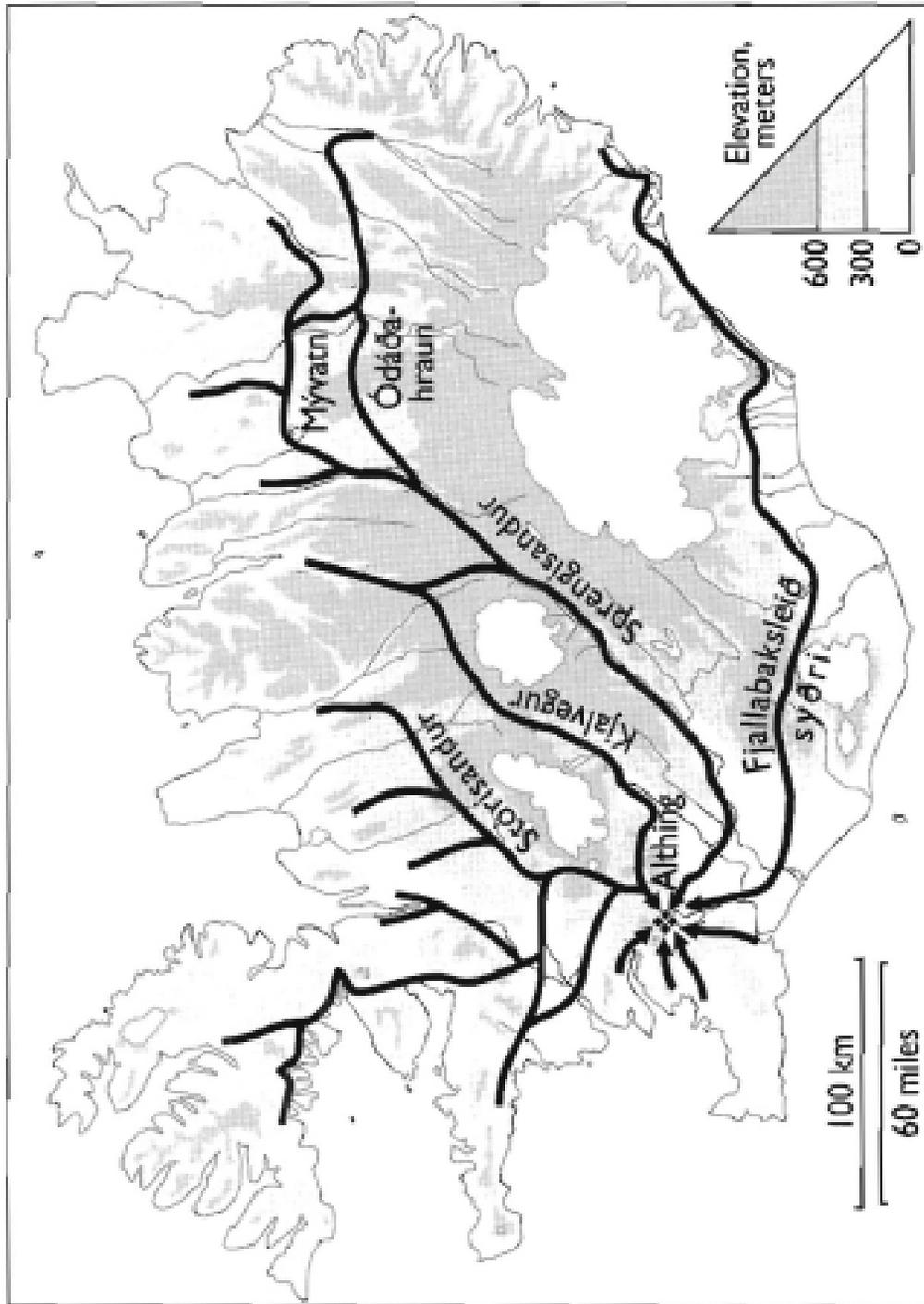
The linkages that bound Iceland into a functioning village-like unit can be seen in cultural features. For example, despite the highly segmented geography of their huge island, in which people lived in regions separated from each other by fjords, mountain ranges, highlands, glaciers, rivers, lava fields, and volcanic wastelands, the Icelandic language became so standardized that no dialects developed. Dividing the young country into administrative quarters -North, South, East, and West -through a series

of consciously enacted constitutional reforms and other law-making at the Althing in the mid-tenth century (ca. 965) did not regionalize loyalties. Instead, the population of the different quarters (see Figures 12.1 and 12.2) focused centrally on the annual Althing, which met for two weeks every June. There the legislature, the *lögrétta*, made laws for the country as a whole, and the courts at the Althing became forums for dispute processing that heard cases of first instance and appeal from anywhere on the island. Outside of government and legal doings, all manner of business was conducted at the Althing. Power brokers traded influence, farmers sold sheep, friendships were forged, distant kinsmen met, ale brewers and merchants sold their wares, and potential marriage partners eyed each other.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the absence of territorial lordship and tribal groupings see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London, 2001).



12.1 The Althing



12.2 The Major Routes to the Althing. An extensive system of horse paths connected the whole island. These led to almost every part of the country, and formed a highly serviceable communications web.

Years ago, the Scottish medievalist Walter P. Ker noticed the island's distinctive unity:

Iceland, though the country is large, has always been like a city-state in many of its ways; the small population though widely scattered was not broken up, and the four quarters of Iceland took as much interest in one another's gossip as the quarters of Florence. In the sagas, where nothing is of much importance except individual men, and where all the chief men are known to one another, a journey from Borg [in the southwest] to Eyjafjord [in the north] is no more than going past a few houses. The distant corners of the island are near each other. There is no sense of those impersonal forces, those nameless multitudes that make history a different thing from biography in other lands.<sup>3</sup>

The Althing was a hothouse of information, a central clearinghouse uniting the whole of Iceland. Along with the great village mentality, which such a centralized assembly fostered, came a dispute dynamic that corresponds to vendetta, which can be characterized as personalized violence often within or touching upon internal village life. The difference between internal village vendetta and blood feud between corporate groups is one of degree. Vendetta tends to involve small groups and individuals rather than large corporate bodies. The anthropologist E. L. Peters distinguishes feud between rival tribes from vendetta killings in villages whose residents recognize codependence and accept the need for moderation in order to live together. As Peters points out, killings occur in vendetta, but "villages are residential units from which feud must be excluded.... Vendetta, akin to feud in the forms of the behavior which characterize hostility, is distinctly different, and appears where feuding relationships cannot be tolerated."<sup>4</sup>

Early Icelanders were, of course contentious, but to what extent were they prepared to accept the disruption of blood-feuding? Here we have to make some decisions. Although the warrior mentality existed in Iceland, its fierceness did not flourish as it did, for example, among the tribal groups of Montenegro, and the surrounding South Slavic areas.<sup>5</sup> The anthropologist Christopher Boehm's description of Montenegrins of two centuries ago

<sup>3</sup> W. P. Ker, *The Dark Ages* (New York, 1958), pp. 200-201.

<sup>4</sup> Emrys L. Peters, "Foreword," in Jacod Black-Michaud, *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean and the Middle East* (Oxford, 1975), pp. ix-xxvii at p. Xiii. See also Anne Knudsen, "Internal Unrest: Corsican Vendetta – A Structured Catastrophe," *Folk* 27 (1985), 65-70; Stephen Wilson, *Feuding Conflict and Banditry in Nineteenth-Century Corsica* (Cambridge, Eng., 1988); and Helgi Thorláksson, "Hvað er blóðhefnd?" in *Sagnaþing: Helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjogtum 10. apríl 1994*, ed. Gísli Sigurðsson, Guðrún Kvaran, and Sigurgeir Steingrímsson (Reykjavik, 1994), pp. 384-414, at pp. 403-6. Thorláksson points out the similarity between Icelandic and Corsican Groups, which "are formed *ad hoc* as in Iceland and composed of unrelated neighbors as well as kinsmen."

<sup>5</sup> I have selected this group because research on feud in the South Slavic region and especially among Montenegrins is well known.

reveals a mentality and a social order very different from those of the early Icelanders. Montenegrins were

warriors living in large territorial groups [who] regulated their own political affairs, and were organized to fight fiercely and effectively to defend their tribal lands. The tribesmen spent much of their energy in warfare, headhunting, and raiding against external enemies; but they also carried on vicious blood feuds among themselves in which the males of one clan had free license to kill any male in an enemy clan and vice versa. In short, the Montenegrins were warrior tribesmen of a type to be found all over the world.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Montenegrins and many groups like them, the Icelandic settlers feuded mostly to the point that exchanges of violence reached the level of vendetta. As a culture group, they showed a consistent restraint that limited all-out blood feud. As might be expected, the semantics of the Icelandic system were extensive. The Icelanders had many words to describe conflicts between individuals and among groups. These words included *fæd* (related to the English word "feud"), *thykkja*, *kali*, *dylgjur*, *úfar*, *úlfúð*, *viðrsjá*, *óthykkja*, *ótheykkt*, *óthokki*, *mistbokki*, *mistbykkja*, *óvingan*, *sundrlyndi*, *sundrtbykki*, *illdeildir*, and *deildir*. They describe situations and the various degrees of dispute, involved in internal village-like vendetta and reaching *all-out* blood feud.

There are also words for the participants themselves. Certain aspects of different cultures show linguistic density that is in keeping with a cultural focus of a particular society. In Iceland linguistic density is evident in many words that refer to states of conflict whose gradations may be difficult to distinguish today. Most of them connote states of dispute that do not or need not involve violence. The principal point is that there is animosity, and people can no longer trust each other to act in good faith. Crucial for the Icelandic situation, these words signify that compromise is becoming difficult and at some point no longer possible, hence a movement toward feud. But this movement, I propose, was restrained.

Viewing Iceland as a great village practicing vendetta helps to solve one of the major problems in the study of Iceland and its feuding culture, namely how to understand Iceland's chieftains. Called *goðar* (sing . *goði*),<sup>7</sup> these leaders possessed only slight formal authority to police, and, until well into the thirteenth century, they had almost no military means to forcefully repress nearby farmers. In many ways, *goðar*, who are de-evolved, small-scale Scandinavian chiefs, resemble redistributive big men known from many minimally stratified or non-stratified societies around the world."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Boehm, *Blood Revenge: The Anthropology of Feuding in Montenegro and Other Tribal Societies* (Lawrence, 1984), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter the English term "chieftain" and the Icelandic term *goði* (pl. *goðar*) are used interchangeably. Referring to *goðar* as chieftains is an old scholarly tradition, though the correspondence is not exact.

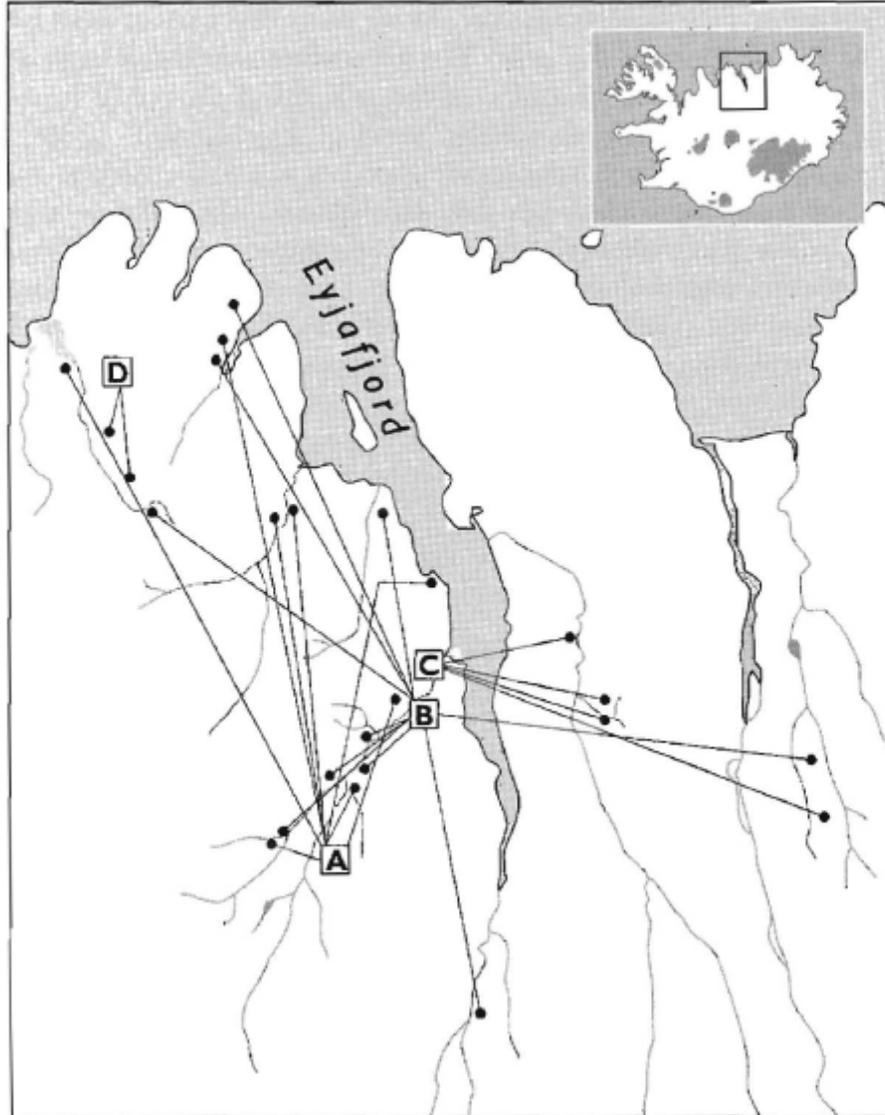
<sup>8</sup> See Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, chap 4, pp. 62-80.

There has long been confusion among researchers about how best to describe the authority of the *goðar*. The uncertainty stems to a large degree from the very nature of the office of the *goði*, called the *goðorð* (sing. and plural), a word that literally means the "word of the chieftain." *Goðorð* were not geographically defined entities, and because a *goðorð* could be shared, there were many more chieftains than chieftaincies. The number of *goðorð* was set by law and each was associated with a particular quarter. The *goðar* were an elite with limited power. They were neither a commanding, territorial nobility, nor tribal leaders, rather they functioned as leaders of interest groups composed of thingmen or followers drawn from among the farmers. Differing from Norwegian or Irish warlords -that is, chiefs, petty kings, and clan and tribal leaders who normally lived surrounded by followers sharing a common loyalty -Iceland's *goðar* lived interspersed among farmers who might be thingmen (that is, publicly declared followers) of other, sometimes rival, *goðar* (see Figure 12.3).

With much information available about leadership and the feuding process in early Iceland, we can ask key questions: On what was the authority of Iceland's *goðar* based and how are we to understand early Iceland's systems of conflict and dispute processing? The answers are contained in the understanding that the authority of Iceland's *goðar* was not that of warleaders so much as that of political middlemen adept at molding often unrelated backers into relatively short-lived political groupings. The best of such leaders were skillful at law and power brokerage. As an elite, the *goðar* were forced by social and economic constraints to limit their leadership niche to managing feud as vendetta rather than as clan or tribal warfare.

Because chieftaincies were not territorial entities, few if any kin, political, or other groups had exclusive control over anyone area. This feature made sustained feuding difficult because there were few if any long-term territorial "refuge areas," that is, defined areas where feudants lived protected, to some extent, by a cluster of kin and friends. For most Icelandic farmers and chieftains, sequestering themselves to engage in an extended feud carried too high a price. Such a withdrawal endangered the survival of their dispersed families because they were not present on their farms to lay up stores for winter or take care of livestock which grazed scattered in the highlands.

Long-term feuding also ended participation in the normal aspects of social life – open meetings, games and assemblies. The psychological dread of exclusion from social life is not to be underestimated. Life during the long winter in this northern country was confined, isolated, and lonely. Removing oneself and one's family from the excitement and bonding opportunities of annual gatherings and assemblies during the relatively short spring, summer and autumn was virtually unthinkable as a regular long-term strategy. Blood feud and other forms of private warfare periodically broke



12.3 **Information from the Saga of Guðmund the Worthy (*Guðmundar saga dyra*).** This saga, written shortly after the death of Gudmund the Worthy (*dyri*) in 1212, gives a detailed and basically reliable picture of *goði*-thingman alliances in the region of Eyjafjord in Iceland's Northern Quarter at the end of the twelfth century. The map portrays the network of criss-crossing ties, with chieftains relying for support on farmers, some of whom lived far away from their chieftains (*goðar*). Although we have information on four chieftains, at least five often rivaling leaders were claiming the allegiance of farmers while at the same time contesting over land and power. The leaders (marked by boxes A, B, C, and D) did not control territorial entities but, in keeping with centuries-old Icelandic traditions, lived scattered among thingmen-farmers (noted by dots), many of whom were loyal to other chieftains.

out in Iceland, but the costs, when weighed against the benefits, did not favor prolonged violence over peaceful settlement.

In keeping with the village-like nature of the society, Icelandic political life in the local districts, where several chieftains competed for the support of the surrounding farmers, resembles to some extent the operation of ward politics in a modern Western city. Within a section of the city, ward politicians or bosses from different parties compete for the allegiance of the voters, who live interspersed among each other.

So too, thingmen of different *goðar* lived next to each other. In Iceland, as in ward politics, the *goðar* promised services to prospective followers, but their ability to gather in allegiances was governed by the rule of diminishing returns. Like a modern ward politician (a big man), an Icelandic *goði* could only promise to support so many people before running into problems of delivering on his promises. This was especially so when two supporters quarreled and the dispute was escalating. Icelandic leaders who competed for the allegiance of the surrounding free farmers made promises but often ran into problems of delivery.

Much as with leadership in ward or village situations, advocacy surfaced in early Iceland as the preferred role that *goðar* played in feud. Supplying this service became for leaders a principal source of power, prestige, and patronage. Advocacy is third-party intervention. As Iceland evolved in the tenth century it became clear that an ordinary farmer in a dispute had little chance of success in facing opponents of more substance without the help of advocates such as *goðar*. By working as advocates and offering, both aggressively and defensively, their services as legal specialists in the conduct of dispute, *goðar* and their thingmen found a way to influence the behavior of others while enjoying the sanction of public opinion." Because advocacy gave farmers access to political networks, assistance, and protection while supplying *goðar* with a systematic means for acquiring financial and political benefits, it became the keystone of a system of reciprocal arrangements in which people carefully kept track of assistance rendered and balanced the books of obligations. The political economy of the island-wide village became based on such bookkeeping.

The concept of Iceland as a great village leads to further observations that help us understand Icelandic society and its forms of feud and dispute processing. Although Iceland's non-territorial chieftaincies could not provide refuge areas so important to blood feud and internal cohesion among tribes, all Iceland, from its inception, was a safe haven. In many ways the country was formed as a Viking Age immigrant sanctuary, and this element of state formation is another factor that should not be

<sup>9</sup> For advocacy and its occurrence in saga narrative, see Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 118-41, 185-206; see also Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 37-8, 74-92.

underestimated. It set an ideological tone, providing later generations with a sense of constitutional principle. The generations following the ninth-century "landtaking" expanded the concept of haven until they perceived of themselves as a distinct culture group. The Icelanders became a united people governed through the Althing rather than members of separate regional groups.

Basic economic considerations played a large role in shaping the Icelandic system of vendetta, managed as it was through the intercession of advocates. The production of Icelandic farms, like households in villages, depended upon cooperation, and here the similarity to village economics is striking. During the summer, the sheep of the different owners roamed the high pastures freely, intermingling in the mountains. The crucial moment for subsistence was the fall roundup. Then the animals were located in the mountains and brought down to the valleys, where they were separated and returned to their owners. Throughout this harvest-like process, with its many opportunities to settle old scores and possibilities for new dispute, feud was barred, and this point is brought home in the sagas. For example, *The Saga of the People of Weapon's Fjord* (*Vápnfirðinga saga*) recounts an episode in which a leader named Thorkel planned to break the peace during the autumn roundup and attack his cousin, the goði Bjarni.<sup>10</sup> A farmer, named Thorvard the Doctor, learns of Thorkel's plans and, although he has had no part in the feud, intervenes:

Bjarni was accustomed every autumn to go up to the mountain pastures, just as his father had done, and at such times no one ventured to attack anyone else. But Thorvard the Doctor learned that Thorkel was getting ready to set out for the mountains and had picked out men who could be trusted to assist him. Thorvard warned Bjarni about this, and Bjarni remained home, getting others to go in his place. Now came the time when men went up into the mountains, and Thorkel's intended meeting with Bjarni did not take place, and they remained peaceful over the winter (chap. 14).

Peer pressure also served to maintain the peace in the seasonal fisheries. *Laxdæla saga*<sup>11</sup> tells us:

A fishing station in Broad Fjord [Breiðafjörðr] was called the Barn Isles. There are many small islands in this group, and they were rich producers. In that time people used to go there in great numbers for the fishing, and many stayed there all year round. Wise people thought it very important that in such fishing stations men should get on well together. It was believed that fishing-luck would run against them, if there were quarrels. Most people were careful to respect this (chap. 14).

<sup>10</sup> *Vápnfirðinga saga* [The Saga of the People of Weapon's Fjord], ed. Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslensk fornrit* 11 (*Austfirðinga sögur*) (Reykjavík, 1950).

<sup>11</sup> *Laxdæla saga*, ed. Einar Ó. Sveinsson, *Íslensk fornrit* 5 (Reykjavík, 1934).

Wergild, the payment of blood money, is known in almost all feuding societies. In some systems, payments are downplayed as unacceptably dishonorable, but in Iceland, in keeping with the movement toward restraint and peace-making, the acceptance of blood money carried little stigma. Wergilds and compensation became routine. They provided restitution for damages rather than fines to authorities and the sagas warn that "one should not kill more men than one can pay for."<sup>12</sup> In learning to budget their vengeance, Icelanders relied on many elements of restraint inherited from Viking Age society. Important among these elements was the distinction between murder (*morð*) and manslaughter (*víg*),<sup>13</sup> *Morð* was recognized as a dishonorable act, *Víg* was different, It was a killing publicly acknowledged by the perpetrator shortly after the act. *Víg* could be atoned for through compensation. It was a step in the disputing process which opened the way to settlement in court or by outside arbitration, As a concealed and unacknowledged slaying, *morð* was a shameful act that brought disgrace to the perpetrator. *Morð*, which could seldom be kept secret, led to reprisal killings, Its discovery meant ostracism and usually led to death or outlawry.

The *goðar*, whose involvement in the disputes of others served to transfer wealth, worked through a country-wide series of networks that reinforced the great village milieu. Much of the boisterous, and at times threatening, nature of Icelandic court cases and negotiated settlements, both inside and outside the courts, turned on fixing suitable sums. Wealth is often institutionalized into power when individuals find ways of converting it into control over sectors of the economy. In the management of feud and the maintenance of an island-wide society, the early *goðar* found their role. They prospered repeatedly through participation in the feuds of others, and their goal was to not get killed. We can ask ourselves whether these men were deeply enmeshed in the type of us-against-them hatred and homicidal behavior commensurate with Lord Bryce's formulation, or whether something else was at work.

In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the courts evolved in a way that facilitated settlements. A solution-orientated court of appeals, the Fifth Court, was established at the Althing in the first decade of the eleventh century, and the duel (*bólmanga*) was outlawed.<sup>14</sup> These changes

<sup>12</sup> *Ljósvelninga saga*, ed. Björn Sigfússon, *Íslenzk fornrit* 10 (Reykjavik, 1940) (A, chaps. 5-9, and C, chaps. 13-9) offers a fine example, See Byock, *Feud*, pp. 241-42, 269 for synopsis of the payment.

<sup>13</sup> *Grágás*, ed. Vilhjálmur Finsen, vol. 1a-b; *Grágás: Íslendernes Lonbog i Fristatens Tid*, udgivet efter det kongelige Bibliotheks Haandskrift (Copenhagen, 1852), 1a:154-57 (chap. 88); vol. 2; *Grágás efter det Armagnaenske Haandskrift Nr. 334 fo.*, *Staðarbólshók* (Copenhagen, 1879), pp. 348-49 (chap. 315); Klaus von See, *Allnordische Rechtsmörter; Philologische Studien zur Rechtsauffasunz und Rechtsgesinnung der Germanen*, Hermaea, 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 16 (Tübingen, 1964), pp21-22.

<sup>14</sup> Olav Bø, "Hólmaganga and Einvigi: Scandinavian Forms of the Duel," *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 2 (1969), 132-48; Jesse Byock, "Hólmganga," in *Encyclopedia of Old Norse Studies*, ed. Philip Pulsiano (New York, 1993), pp. 989-90; Marlene Ciklamini, "The Old Icelandic Duel," *Scandinavian Studies* 35 (1963), 175-95.

reflect the restraining norms of Icelandic feud, which accepted a manslaughter or two, but eschewed prolonged blood feud. Manslaughters resulted from many motivations: for example, insult, theft, greed, politics, jealousy, seduction, temper, passion, insanity, depression, or willful cruelty. In Iceland homicide could start a blood feud, but often did not, and this reality helps us to begin to draw some conclusions. In a far northern environment that could scarcely afford the ravages of warfare on the level of continuous homicidal feuding, blood vengeance became an option rather than a duty. Vengeance -that is action that satisfies the needs of hatred and the debts of loss -could be routinely achieved through compromise. In fact, a willingness to find compromise solutions is one of early Iceland's distinguishing features.

For compromise to work consistently, settlements had to be respected. *The Short Story of Snegla Halli (Sneglu Halla þáttur)* provides a glimpse of the dishonor caused by breaking a reconciliation.<sup>15</sup> It calls a settlement breaker a *niðingr*, the strongest legal term of abuse which was otherwise reserved for villains, cowards, traitors, and individuals who committed wanton cruelty. In the presence of the king of Norway, Halli was accused by an opponent of having failed to avenge his father's death. In response to this accusation the king asked:

"Is it true, Halli, that you have not avenged your father?"

"True it is, lord," answered Halli.

"With this situation, why did you travel to Norway?"

"It is this way, lord," replied Halli. "I was a child when he was killed, and my kinsmen took up the case. They arranged a settlement on my behalf, and among us, it does not sit well to be called by the name of *gríðniðingr* [settlement breaker]."

The saga puts Halli, an Icelander, in the position of stoutly defending the honor accorded this custom of restraint, revealing a cultural opposition that Icelanders perceived to lie between their own and Norwegian society.

Individuals who failed to observe the restraining rules of Icelandic feud/vendetta and settlement were outlawed, a sentence that itself served as a legalized form of blood taking. A difference between outlawry and blood taking was that the former was a court-imposed sentence aimed at ending feud. It was an act for which family members and friends could scarcely take vengeance. Outlawry, which could be lesser outlawry, that is a three-year banishment abroad, or full outlawry, in which the outlaw was denied exit from Iceland and remained as an outcast until hunted to death, provided Icelandic society with an efficient, cost-effective, and graduated

<sup>15</sup> *Sneglu Halla þáttur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Íslensk fornrit 9 (Eyfirdingja sögur)* (Reykjavík, 1956), p. 278

means of removing troublemakers. Dependence on outlawry simplified the role of Icelandic corporate groups by exempting them from the need to maintain a policing body to oversee the imposition of corporal punishment, execution, or incarceration.

The sagas, with their penchant for narrating crises in the lives of individuals, are filled with examples of blood letting as well as the sad ends that await outlaws and others who cannot live within the restraints set by the village-like society. As social dramas of a culture in which successful groups routinely operated with reserve, the sagas offered the audience the ability to explore the ramifications of often outrageously individualistic and otherwise heroic but unsuccessful behavior.<sup>16</sup> Brave men and hard women do in the sagas what most everyone in the Viking Age, and many down to today, dream of: they refuse to compromise, and the stories are filled with examples of vengeance killings, situations rarely tolerated in real life. As a storytelling of crisis, the sagas explored success and failure, and in pointing to the obvious they reinforced social norms. It is not by chance that, amidst the blood letting, the sagas repeatedly focus on the prestige accorded to advocates. More space is devoted to intricate descriptions of cunning legal stratagems, in which individuals save their property and honor, rather than co-fighting. Repeatedly in the sagas, the rule of law is weighed against the costs of violent response or disregard of consensus.

In conclusion we can say that early on, Iceland's institutions adapted to a situation in which the focus of activity shifted more toward reducing the threat of feud than toward dealing with its continuance. The nature of Iceland's feuding groups played a key role, a factor that was, in part, a response to the geographical constraints of the island environment. Icelandic groups were not sufficiently cohesive for the "us-against-them" mentality to reign over the long term. Once a series of initial violent acts took place, possibly followed by escalation over a period of time, the threat of continuing, perhaps generations-long exchanges diminished. In their place came a type of limited feud or vendetta characterized by ritualized forms of menace, armed posturing, and on occasion selective manslaughters. Legalistic compromise took center stage in a political economy whose saga telling taught Icelanders not to kill more frequently than one could afford.

<sup>16</sup> Vilhjálmur Amason, "Morality and Social Structure in the Icelandic Sagas," *Journal of English and Icelandic Philology* 90.2 (1991), 157-74, has grappled with the possibility that some of modern Iceland's favorite saga heroes were in their original environment politically inept.