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NARRATING SAGA FEUD: DECONSTRUCTING THE FUNDAMENTAL ORAL PROGRESSION

TOWARD the middle of *Vápnfirðinga saga* is a small episode that could easily escape the reader's attention. Two farmers, each a thingman of a different local chieftain, quarrel over grazing and tree-cutting rights in a woodland they own in common. Up to this point the two *bændr* have shared the use of the property, hut now one of them, Þórðr, is threatened by his more aggressive and wealthier neighbor Þormóðr. Intimidated by Þormóðr, Þórðr seeks support. As is the custom, the free farmer goes to his chieftain Brodd-Helgi and asks his help in solving the problem.

But the *goði*, a major character in the saga, is a hard man. He refuses to help his thingman unless the latter hands over all his property and comes to live on Helgi's farm. (ÍF XI, eh. 7):¹

Brodd-Helgi kvazk eigi nenna at della um fé hans [Þórðar] ok engan hlut mundu í eiga, nema hann handsalaði honum féit allt ok færi til Hofs með alit sitt.

(Brodd-Helgi declared that he had no intention of quarreling over his [Þórðr's] property and would take no part in the matter, unless he [Þórðr] transferred to him all the property and moved everything of his to Hof [Brodd-Helgi's farm].)

Caught in a dilemma, Þórðr accepts Helgi's offer and legally assigns his patrimony to his chieftain: 'Hann (Þórðr) kaus at ok seldisk Helga arf-sali.' (He [Þórðr] chose that and surrendered to Helgi his inheritance.)

Later in the saga the reason for including this seemingly unimportant incident becomes clear. The still unresolved dispute over the woodland merges into an ongoing conflict between two chieftains, Brodd-Helgi and his rival Geitir Lýtingsson. The incident is a step in the escalation of

¹ *Vápnfirðinga saga* in *Austfirðinga sogur*, ed. Jón Jóhannesson, *Íslenzk fornrit XI* (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1950).

the saga's major feud. As the purpose of including the episode is clearly to advance the main feud, neither Þórðr's personal tragedy nor his motivation is explored. In fact, the saga shows little interest in the character of Þórðr; instead, it focuses on the role this incident plays in a chain of events eventually leading to the death of the overly ambitious Brodd-Helgi.

In terms of the saga's basic structure, the conflict between the two farmers sets in motion a series of actions, which we find repeated throughout the sagas, and which are recognizable as a distinct narrative unit. In the sagas, of course, many *þættir* are worthy of investigation. This pattern of events from *Vápnfirðinga saga*, however, is a core structure, serving as an essential building block of saga story. Here, I am considering this primary structure in a semiotic mode, abstracting the conflict as it moves from a dispute between farmers to a feud between chieftains. My goal is to provide a means for untying the Gordian knot of saga studies, the convergence of social and literary norms. By constructing tools for analyzing the basic grammar of saga narrative, we advance two studies: that of the narrative and that of the society.

The sagas are about conflict and feud, and the basic building blocks of saga structure are small, discrete particles of action. These particles — which have elsewhere termed feudemes — may be represented symbolically and pictorially.² Reducing the action particles to their most abstract level, stripping them of names, places, and details, reveals the fundamental simplicity of saga structure. Structurally, there are only a limited number of actions that the sagateller draws upon. The initial scene he selects — even one as seemingly small and insignificant as the confrontation between the farmers Þórðr and Þormóðr — has far-reaching consequences: it directs the progression of the elaborate feud to follow. This progression, which is not strictly mathematical or mechanically deterministic, is structured like a flowchart, with each step being the result of a conscious choice that itself presents another dilemma, ne-

²Jesse L. Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Los Angeles and Berkeley; University of California Press, 1982). The analogy of feudemes with linguistic terminology is discussed on pages 57-60. As their name suggests, the role of these action particles in feud is similar to the role of morphemes in language. The feudeme forms a relatively stable, indivisible unit of feud within the context of both saga and society. These discrete action particles and their patterned groupings are the oral narrative elements upon which the structure of the later written saga is based.

cessitating that a new choice must be made before the action can move forward.

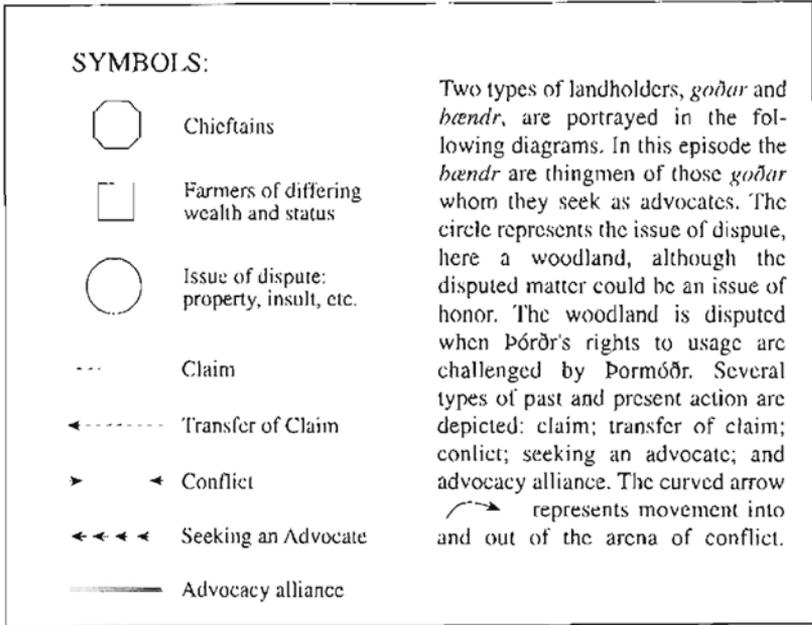
With this in mind, I illustrate a small section of the major feud chain in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. As detailed as the story grows, as many chieftains and farmers as it pulls in, each step, crucial to the progression of the unraveling story, may nevertheless be diagrammed very simply. Although the saga must move relentlessly forward, the sagaman in each instance keeps drawing pictures representing the same underlying elements of advocacy, conflict, and resolution. The actions are simple, basic, and few, and it is not by chance that they fit so easily together to form the narrative structure of feud tales. Saga narration is an example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts: a series of small oral narrative elements is chained together by the logic of Icelandic feuding into a complex story line suitable as written narration.

Consider Þórðr's small, sad story. The saga has little to say about the background of his troubles or the motivations of the people involved. Instead, basic action is tersely described in a few sentences. In some sagas, such narrative units are embroidered with portents, local history, genealogy, connivings, ghosts, and killings, but the episode of farmer Þórðr and his lost land has no such embellishments. It is cut to the bare bones, exposing the basic pattern of incidents, progressing from stability to temporary resolution.

The bare, patterned nature of the action, however, does not lack significant meaning. It serves as a system of signs, channeling the teller/author's prose and fixing the audience's attention by triggering the rich social understanding that the listener/reader shares with the sagateller. This fundamental, semantic contract between sagateller and audience dominates saga narration, maintaining the element of oral tradition in the text and furnishing the sagas as a genre with their characteristic sense of homogeneity. The medieval audience, knowing that Þórðr's options are limited, considers his choices. The modern reader might simply see a poor man seeking protection, but the medieval audience would evaluate Þórðr's position, considering whether he should reject the chieftain's offer and chance losing his life to his bullying neighbor. Þórðr, by handing over his land to a *goði*, gains the immediate protection of a powerful advocate, yet, in doing so he loses his autonomy and the status — both for himself and for his heirs — that come with being a landholder.

Honor, as it so often does in the sagas, invigorates the issue of Þórðr's choices, providing an intellectual as well as emotional bridge between otherwise patterned and repetitive social actions. Here, in the bargain between *goði* and *bændr*, honor plays a crucial background role. The medieval audience would surely note, and probably comment upon, Þórðr's small victory, for if this poor farmer loses his land, he nevertheless does so in a manner that partly assuages his honor. In fact, Þórðr gets the last bitter laugh in his dealings with his neighbor Þormóðr. This is because in choosing to transfer his land to Brodd-Helgi, Þórðr, for a brief instant, takes control of the direction of the action. He exits from the quarrel with the knowledge, shared by the community, that his opponent Þormóðr is now in deep trouble. Þormóðr, in return for his determination to bully a neighbor, will now have to defend his person and property against Brodd-Helgi, a dangerous and motivated *goði*. Honor, in fact, has been in the background the whole time, severely limiting Þórðr's choices and thrusting the narrative forward according to the basic pattern of the progression. Despite the danger, honor made it difficult for Þórðr to do nothing. Faced with a humiliating situation, the farmer would have been mocked and probably goaded by others into challenging and perhaps even attempting to kill Þormóðr — a risky venture. Instead, Þórðr turns to an advocate, proving himself a difficult man to humiliate. Once Þórðr has transferred his land, he cannot be intimidated into dropping his claim. To the contrary, he is relieved of responsibility. The rights of prosecution that come with ownership have been assumed by Brodd-Helgi. With the *schaden freude* that we so often see in the Icelandic texts, Þórðs can enjoy, from a distance, the dangers (and death) that await Þormóðr in the escalating feud between Brodd-Helgi and Geitir.

Inherent in the exchange between *goði* and *bondi* is the fact that Brodd-Helgi also has choices. As an aggressive chieftain he is always interested in increasing his wealth and power. Before taking on the *bóndi's* case, Helgi must consider the risk and weigh the costs of his involvement. Again nothing is said in the text, but the simple, repetitive nature of the action focuses the reader's mind on the available choices. And choices are critical, for the medieval audience knows in advance that Helgi fails in the end. In this instance, because Brodd-Helgi is already embroiled in an escalating feud with the chieftain Geitir, he



Explanation of the symbols

apparently does not mind taking the risk. Acquiring a claim to a valuable woodland — along with the possibilities offered by such a case for harassing Geitir's thingman Þormóðr — will enhance his position. At least that is what Helgi thinks. The audience, however, is aware that Helgi's death will be caused by just such immoderate rapacity for wealth and power.

The following diagrams are vehicles for analyzing dynamics on all levels of the politically active spectrum. We can map the path of the medieval storyteller as he fashions his tale within the social and economic realities of his society. The diagrams de-emphasize character analysis, focusing instead on action. They delineate the thematic blocks of saga story, while tracing the effect of a disputed parcel of land on an escalating feud between chieftains. By deconstructing the story in this way, the knowledge of the medieval audience is laid open to us. We see social patterns within the context of the rural society and recognize the

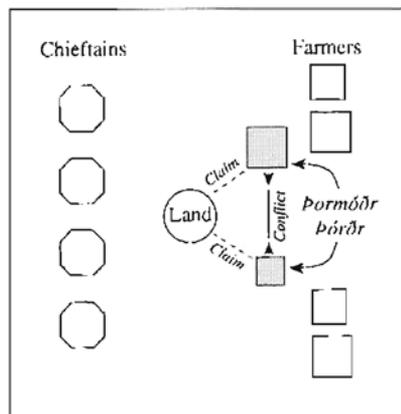


Diagram 1 -- Conflict: Farmer with farmer.

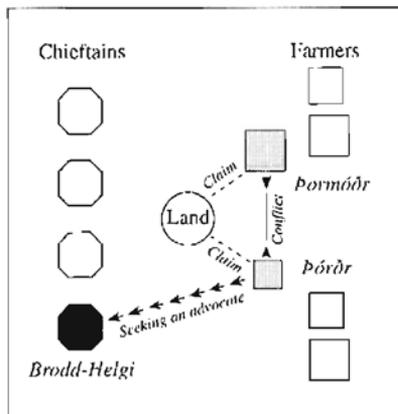


Diagram 2 -- Seeking an advocate: Farmer to chieftain:

constraints placed upon the sagaman by the audience and its knowledge.

The first diagram portrays the initial phase of the dispute between Þórðr and Þormóðr. At this stage, the conflict is limited to the farmers, with chieftains having no reason to intervene. There is, however, movement within the system. As a result of Þórðr and Þormóðr's quarrel, the land has lost its place as a securely owned possession, it has moved into the liminal area of contest between the secure position of the farmers and their wealth on the one hand and the secure position of the chieftains on the other. Not yet a prize for the *goðar*, the woods are no longer safely controlled by farmers. Here the social reality, well-known to the medieval audience but again left unsaid, is that chieftains do not replenish their wealth by regular and open means such as taxation. Rather, they amass property in a predatory manner, taking advantage of the troubles of farmers like Þórðr.

At the stage of this first diagram the confrontation could have been settled between the two men. If a settlement had been arranged, the property would have moved out of the undefined area of contest. Þormóðr, however, is unreasonable, and Þórðr is forced to seek the aid of an advocate (diagram 2). As a result, the property remains within the reach of a chieftain. Although in this instance the dispute is over a piece

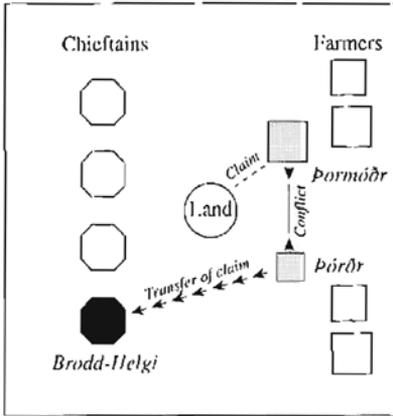


Diagram 3 — Transferring a claim:
Farmer to chieftain.

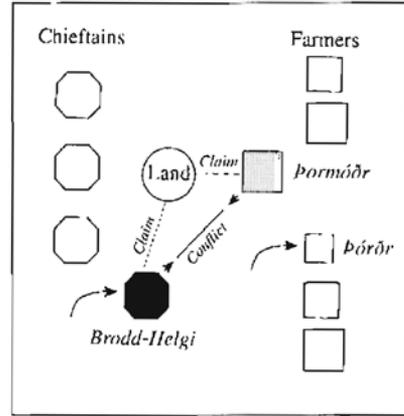


Diagram 4 — Conflict: Farmer with
chieftain.

of property, in other *þættir* the quarrel may be over more intangible matters such as insults or other offenses to honor.

Þórðr finds a powerful advocate, but Brodd-Helgi demands payment: Þórðr's property, which includes his clouded interest in the woodland. Caught between his threatening neighbor and his grasping *goði*, Þórðr has little choice. Negotiations are quickly completed, the farmer's claim to half-ownership of the land is transferred (diagram 3), and Þórðr and his family go to live on Brodd-Helgi's laud. In demanding Þórðr's farm, Brodd-Helgi allows his greed for property to win out over the integrity of his role as protector and arbitrator of local disputes. Decisions such as this one have much to do with the ultimate success or failure of individual chieftains. The outcome of all these choices makes it clear that Þórðr's loss of his land to his chieftain signals a change in the dramatic tension of the story. The honor and the prestige of a chieftain are now engaged in a dispute.

With Brodd-Helgi replacing Þórðr, the dispute advances from the private to the public realm. The stage is now set for a conflict between Þormóðr and the chieftain, Brodd-Helgi (diagram 4). Ownership of the land remains in dispute.

A chieftain's honor and reputation are not just his own but represent the power and standing of his thingmen. In this instance, the dispute becomes a major test of political strength. Because Þormóðr is unwilling

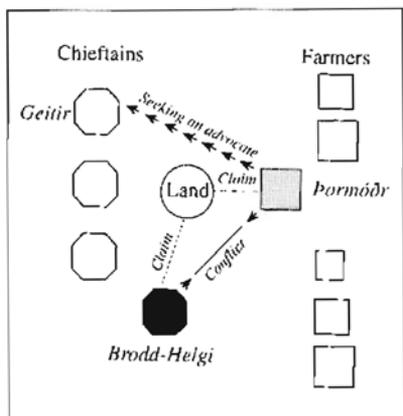


Diagram 5 – Seeking an advocate:
Farmer to chieftain.

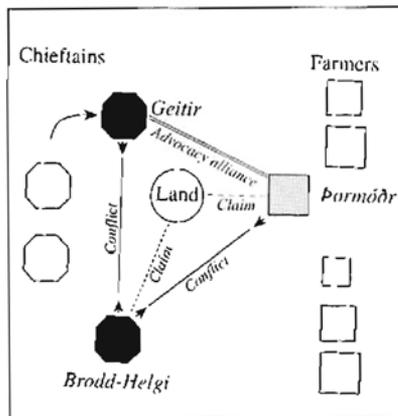


Diagram 6 – Conflict: Chieftain with
chieftain.

to stand alone against Brodd-Helgi, he seeks the assistance of a powerful advocate by going to his chieftain, Geitir, Brodd-Helgi's rival (diagram 5).

Geitir accepts the case from Pormóðr, his thingman. The chieftain does not demand the farmer's interest in the parcel of land as payment; therefore Pormóðr, unlike Þórðr, remains in the picture. In accepting the case, Geitir has to consider a number of factors. Among them are the effect his action will have on his position in the community, his reputation with his thingmen, and his ability to gather support if the case goes to the Althing or if it turns into a fight.

Taking stock at this point of the progression of the narrative we see that the sagateller, guided by the clear path of the social pattern, has logically and with seemingly little contrivance escalated his story into a conflict between *goðar*. Along the way, the dramatic tension of the saga has risen. So too, the intrinsic interest of the story has increased as the talc changes from a dispute between petty farmers to a clash between major rivals. The conflict is poised to spread to the larger society, involving other chieftains and farmers as supporters, judges at the things, and arbitrators.

As soon as it becomes known that a chieftain has taken on a case involving a confrontation, he leaves the security of his established position. In this instance, two professional advocates have exercised their

options to intervene in a dispute originating between farmers. As a result, they enter into the arena of contest, risking the loss of everything from reputation to life (diagram 6). Land, status, honor — all the tangibles and intangibles of old Icelandic society — are at stake.

The land also remains in play. The property, although claimed by several parties, is in reality possessed by no one. The contest advances to an open feud, with the uninformed *bændr*, as well as other *goðar*, watching from the sidelines.

The small pattern that we have abstracted here is the most basic and most frequently repeated progression of conflict in saga narrative. The intervention of advocates in a dispute sets in motion events that determine the success or failure of the society's 'big men'. If the dispute advances, the chieftains engaged will be forced to call in or purchase favors from other chieftains and important farmers. The disputed land is no longer the most important issue, but it remains as the prize in the contest. If the conflict ends here, the chieftains return to the security of their defined position, accepting such readjustments of power and reputation as have occurred. The ownership of the land will be settled, with the property returning to the unambiguous status of a defined possession.

If a settlement is not achieved, a new series of patterned actions commences, as in *Vápnfirðinga saga*. The narrative continues with new acts of conflict and of advocacy seeking, but, as with the chain of events that we have abstracted, the number of moves on the chessboard of Icelandic feud is limited. Over and over in the sagas, we see the same pattern of dispute escalation. The diagrams presented here can, with little variation, be used in saga after saga to abstract this fundamental progression, providing a much-needed analytical tool for exploring a core social drama. Focusing on the cultural roots of repetitive action is something new in saga studies, and this approach shifts the discourse. It lays the foundations for a new methodology — one that analyzes the convergence of social and literary norms and allows us to confront directly the issue of social memory.³ Surely, as the diagrams show, we will see that the sagateller's art was based less on invention than upon skill in describing traditional actions.

³ For an important study of this subject, and one that includes the sagas, see; James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

The sagas are a literature famed for economy of style. Through tersely described action, the texts harmonize the personal and social aspects of Icelandic life, capturing the intellectual and emotional attention of the medieval audience. This convergence of the public and the private served the medieval storyteller well, providing an underlying structure for the narrative. The repeated presentation of incident after incident of dispute and settlement, all so similar in essential elements but so varied in specifics, was bound by strict social convention. Conflict, the heart of dramatic narration, had to be controlled and presented in the light of social norms. In following the patterns of traditional action, the saga writer could embellish character and add detail, giving the story a particular stamp, but this person was not allowed to break the patterns of social realism. The attentive and knowledgeable medieval audience, aware of the inherent possibilities of the drama, was partner to the author in the creation of the text. The sagateller created the details of the story; the audience defined the limitations of the plot.