# A Matter of Medieval Honour and Kingship: The Portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Kings in the Icelandic Sagas

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*The Portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Kings in the Icelandic Sagas*

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# Introduction

In *Magnúss saga ins Góða* (the third part of the *Heimskringla*) a poet named Sigvatr composed a *flokker*[1] for King Magnús of Norway and Denmark (r. 1035-1047) who was hesitating overly to stop a number of landowners that were threatening to start hostilities against him.[2] In a part of the poem, Sigvatr calls Magnús' honour into question:

> Who counsels you cancel,
> king intent on hatred –
> often you assay slender
> swords – your promises?
> A prosperous king of people
> his pledges must honour.
> To break your bond never,
> battle-enlarger ['battle-increaser', warrior], befits you.

At the end of the poem, honour is mentioned again:

> All say the same: 'Of his
> subjects' ancestral properties
> my lord claims ownership.'
> Honourable farmers turn against him.
> He who his inheritance
> hands out to king's barons
> according to rushed rulings
> will reckon that robbery.[3]

With this poem, Sigvatr claims that Magnús does not execute his pledges as a king properly. The landowners are called 'honourable farmers' and they claim that their lands will be lost

[1] A series of stanzas [metrical unit in a poem] without a refrain; a less formal style of poetry than a *drápa* [a heroic, laudatory verse].
[2] *Heimskringla III*, A. Finlay and A. Faulkes trans., *Heimskringla vol. III*: *Magnús Óláfsson to Magnús Erlingsson* (London 2015) 17.
[3] Ibidem, 18-19.

because of the king's rushed laws which the landowners consider robbery. After the warnings, the king realised that his pledges (to the people) must be honourable. The king held a discussion with the wisest people, and they agreed on the landowners' rightful laws. Magnús wrote a law code that is known as Grágás (Gray Goose Laws). King Magnús became popular and beloved by all in his country. Therefore, the king that honoured the pledges of his people is known as Magnús inn góði (the Good).[4]

The Old-Norse *sagas* (which are closely related to the common verb *segja* 'to say, tell') are in a basic sense 'what someone said' or tales and stories. The sagas are not poems themselves but often contain poetry. One gets a strong impression from medieval Icelandic usage that sagas are stories about people, whether about foreigners or kings and other high-ranking Scandinavian leaders, such as the king of Norway and jarls of the Orkney Islands, or most commonly, about Icelandic families inhabiting a specific region of the island. The sagas are also divided into genres, which will be discussed in more detail further on. The most important saga-genres for this thesis are the family sagas and the kings' sagas. The family sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) is a sub-genre that deals with the doings of Icelandic families during the period from the settlement of Iceland until the time of the Icelanders' conversion to Christianity (ca. 1000). The kings' sagas (*konungassögur*) refer to the sagas of the kings of Norway. The oldest sagas were written down at their earliest in the twelfth century. There is a possible connection between oral narrative, oral poetry and written texts. Although the beginning of the textualization process lay in the twelfth century, much of what was written down either no longer exists in manuscripts of later, sometimes much later dates.[5] Besides Scandinavia, the sagas provide evidence that Icelandic writers were well informed about Anglo-Saxon England. English kings even portray an important role in some sagas.[6] Like in *Magnúss saga ins Góða,*

[4] Ibidem, 19.
[5] M.C. Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge 2010), 15-16, 28-29, 52.
[6] M. Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts* (Toronto 2005) vii-viii.

Magnús' ideas about honour influenced his actions with the landowners. When his commitment to honour came into question, he changed his ideas. But was Magnús the only king in the sagas where honour played an importance to his portrayal?

In this master thesis I am going to analyse how Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings were portrayed in the Icelandic sagas. Within their portrayal, the theme of honour will be of central importance. A sub-agenda will be to explain how the kings' sagas and the family sagas interpreted this theme differently. Many historians have contributed to research on honour in the Icelandic sagas, one of them being William Ian Miller. To give a preview, Miller argues that honour was a form of 'social mathematics', if someone's honour went up, someone else's went down. In a case of one-on-one combat, this becomes more obvious: the honour was acquired by the victor and was funded almost entirely by the loser. Oren Falk argues that when an Icelandic feud occurred between two groups there was always an observance of certain cultural norms, which is usually summarized as a 'honour code'. It was less easily observed in cases in which peacemakers attained honour for bringing a resolution of a dispute. But what or who had the ability to bestow someone with honour? Falk argues that: "[…] each action is encoded as re-action to an opponent's misdeeds; not only the ends of feuds, then, but beginnings, too recede infinitely." (as we will see, this is not only the case with a feud).[7] Honour can sometimes be compared with a 'zero-sum game': if every man had it, no man had it. In almost any event, people in an honour-driven society tend to act as if honour was a scarce commodity, the supply of which was either constant or diminishing, even if both parties in an interaction end up looking good. In other cases, it was also possible for both adversaries to gain (dis)honour, as for instance a gift was not always meant as an insult.[8] An easier approach to this idea of social mathematics could be translated into a simple 'social formula': the giver of

[7] O. Falk, *Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland* (Oxford 2021) 115.
[8] W.I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (New York 1993) 17; W.I. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago 1990) 30-31; Falk, *Violence and Risk in Medieval* Iceland, 115.

honour, the (im)material transaction, and the receiver of honour. One person gives honour, he or she uses something or someone as a form of the transaction, and another person receives honour. Every part of this social formula can be filled in according to a certain saga or episode. This formula will be used to get a better overview of the complicated episodes of the sagas.

Honour was of great importance in the Icelandic world, not only to a subject but also a king. During this analysis, this master thesis will try to answer 'how Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings were portrayed in the Icelandic sagas'. Little research is done on a comparison of honour between the sub-genres of the sagas. This master-thesis wants to give a better insight on the differences that can be drawn from the portrayal of the kings in the different genres of the sagas. This master thesis will use different Icelandic sagas and secondary literature to find an answer to this question. As there are so many sagas, it will only be based on a small collection. Sagas which frequently mention Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings and sagas that relate kings, and their honour will be used. There are obviously far more sagas that refer to kingship and honour, but in some of these cases, the lengths in which these subjects are discussed are of far less detail than those mentioned in this analysis.

In the first chapter, I will discuss the important principles of honour and kingship. How did these concepts work and how was it represented in Early Medieval and High Medieval England and Scandinavia? It would give a better insight on the topic when one approaches the sagas. The second chapter will begin its analysis of how honour played a part in the portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the kings' sagas. By establishing portrayal, a dynamic can be created to analyse and compare the family sagas. In the third chapter the established portrayal of kings in the kings' sagas will be continued and used with the family sagas. How did honour play a part in the family sagas and was it any different than in the kings' sagas? Was it the king himself who bestowed himself with honour or were there other influential individuals that had the power of a "giver of honour"?

# 1. The Meaning of Honour and Kingship in the Viking Age

This chapter will establish the meaning of both concepts of "honour" and kingship". In what occasion was honour given, and was this always a king? Besides secondary literature, this chapter will also feature a few episodes from some sagas to give a better understanding to both concepts. The following sagas are featured: *Ljósvetninga saga*, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Njál's saga*.

## Honour

Honour is very important in the sagas. Margaret Clunies Ross argued that "[…] it is clear from saga literature that an idealised personal honour was above all the currency in which the esteem of an individual was measured".[9] The qualities that characterised a "manly" or honourable man were courage, reticence, calculated aggression, physical strength and honesty. The negative side of personal honour was also a common theme in the sagas. Cowardice, garrulousness, treachery, physical weakness or disability were seen as negative signs of manliness, and were often expressed in a sexualised idiom, in which an unmanly man could be accused of passive homosexuality or bestiality, a charge so serious it could lead to death. Honour could be affected by the actions or inactions of others as within a family. For instance, any assault upon the honour by a male family member, like an unauthorised sexual approach of its female members. Another example is conflicts that resulted in injuries or killings that demanded retribution on the part of the injured party or his representatives to restore honour and avoid shame. Family members and political associates were expected to participate in acts of vengeance in order to preserve honour. The sagas showed that they are very critical towards dishonour and failure to live up to stands of individual probity.[10]

[9] Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 7.
[10] Ibidem, 7-8, 91.

William Ian Miller and Oren Falk have argued that honour was at stake in virtually every social interaction in the Scandinavian world.[11] Consider the *Ljósvetninga saga*, where two men, one a powerful chieftain named Gudmund and one *bóndi* named Ofeig, contend for precedence in seating arrangements at a feast given by one of Gudmund's thingman. Gudmund was appointed the seat of honour and Ofeig was given the seat next to him.[12] The saga tells it as follows:

> And when the tables were set, Ofeig put his fist on the table and said, "How big does that fist seem to you, Gudmund?"
> "Big enough," he said.
> "Do you suppose there is any strength in it?" asked Ofeig.
> "I certainly do," said Gudmund.
> "Do you think it would deliver much of a blow?" asked Ofeig.
> "Quite a blow," Gudmund replied.
> "Do you think it might do any damage?" continued Ofeig.
> "Broken bones or a deathblow," Gudmund answered.
> "How would such an end appeal to you?" asked Ofeig.
> "Not much at all, and I wouldn't choose it," said Gudmund.
> Ofeig said, "Then don't sit in my place."
> "As you wish," said Gudmund-and he sat to one side. People had the impression that Ofeig wanted the greater portion of honor, since he had occupied the high-seat up to that time.[13]

[11] Falk, *Violence and Risk*, 46; Miller, *Bloodtaking and* Peacemaking, 29-30.
[12] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 29-30.
[13] *Ljósvetninga saga*, in B. Sigfússon ed., *Ljósvetninga saga* (Reykjavik 1940) 21 : 58-59.

This passage shows how offended sensibilities over seating arrangements lead to conflict. Miller argues that seating arrangements provided one of the few occasions in the Scandinavian culture where relative ranking was clearly visible.[14]

In some cases an act of sexuality can be bestowed with honour or dishonour. An example is featured in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. It must be said first that *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* is neither a family nor a kings' saga, but a legendary saga. Legendary sagas or *fornaldarsögur*, which means 'sagas of the old times', is prehistoric, considered from an Icelandic view as it belongs to the period before the settlement of Iceland and before the conversion to Christianity. Iceland is never the setting in this sub-genre. And yet many protagonists are said to have been born in Norway and had Icelandic descendants. A number of the *fornaldarsögur* represented a world of Scandinavian royal and heroic dynasties in which the lives of several generations of legendary royal houses are traced from mythical beginnings and are connected with the historical Scandinavian families. The protagonists in many of these sagas are said to have connections with individuals who lived in historical times. The protagonist married, had children and lived lives that involved everyday tasks. However, strange things happened to them, and they frequently interacted with inhuman characters like dwarves, trolls, mound-dwelling heroes of a past age, giantesses, a poetry-spouting mountain and a merman. Many of the *fornaldarsögur* feature momentous family conflict, involving honour. For *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, the main themes are inter-generational conflict between fathers and sons, and the status of married and unmarried women.[15]

A particular episode in the saga involves King Ragnar Lodbrok (r. ninth century) meeting Aslaug (Kraka) for the first time. At that moment Aslaug was accompanied by a hound. Aslaug was met by Ragnar's men who asked her to accompany her to the king himself on his ship. Aslaug would not go unless her safety and that of the hound were assured. When she was

[14] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30.
[15] Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, 76-77, 80.

in Ragnar's presence, the king reached out with his arm to her, but he got bitten by the hound. Then Ragnar's men ran up and slew the hound and stretched a bow-string about its neck. Like Ragnar, the soldiers had no respect for Aslaug's safety.[16] Ragnar placed himself besides Aslaug and spoke a verse: "If this gentle maid gave me honor due, The clasp of her arms she'd deny me not.", Aslaug said: "If the prince will uphold the word he gave, He will let me depart and go without spot".[17] Ragnar had damaged Aslaug's trust by letting the hound be killed. Yet despite this Ragnar believed that he was in a position to make Aslaug his wife (that is the honour he deems owed to him, "honor due"). Aslaug was not pleased and wished to leave. Ragnar thought he had the moral high ground as his bitten hand justifies the killing of the hound. After spending a night at the ship, she still had not decided if she would leave Ragnar.[18] That evening Ragnar wished that Aslaug would sleep together with him. Aslaug, not yet persuaded, said: "[…] it is my wish that thou first hold marriage with me when thou comest to thy kingdom [meaning, not on a ship, but openly]; methinks that befits my honor and thine, and the honor of our heirs, if we have any".[19] Aslaug did not completely trust Ragnar and the king needed to win his honour back. When they returned to Ragnar's kingdom, Aslaug wanted to sleep besides Ragnar in one bed for three days before engaging in sexual intercourse. She explained that to our "[future] son this would save [prevent] a lasting harm, For boneless is he [whom] thou wouldst now beget". Although Aslaug warned Ragnar, however, he engaged sexually with her on the third night.[20] Ragnar thus did not respect the honour that Aslaug sought to acquire by delayed intercourse, three chaste nights demonstrating respect. Ragnar is here portrayed as an untrustworthy king who is underestimating the risks of dishonour with his actions. This episode from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* explains to us that Ragnar had an idea of honour, which

[16] *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, in M. Schlauch, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, Together With the Lay of Kraka*, (New York; third edition 1964) 185-258, here 202.
[17] Ibidem, 203.
[18] Ibidem, 204-205.
[19] Ibidem, 205.
[20] Ibidem, 206.

influenced his actions. While Ragnar saw honour killing the hound and disrespecting the delaying of sexual intercourse, Aslaug saw honour in respecting her trust. This particular episode shows that one's idea of honour was more important than the risk of losing it.

In some sagas, honour is of great importance while kings or skálds are not of central importance. *Njál's saga* is a great example for this. Honour is a central theme in *Njál's saga*. In this saga the individual or family honour is central to the narrative; kings or earls only portray a minor part. There are some episodes where honour is mentioned in relation to a king or earl, but this is just on a few occasions. Any act to one's honour or honour of the family had to be avenged, with either blood or money. Men were called out surprisingly quickly for their lack of honour in the saga. It was very easy to provoke one into action to avenge some suspicion of insult.[21]

But first let us establish the origin and the plot of the saga. *Njal's saga* is one of the most popular of all the classical Icelandic sagas. It was written in Iceland by an unknown author in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, around 1280. Its early popularity can be recognized from the fact that more manuscripts of the saga have survived than of any other saga. The saga itself is an epic prose narrative about people who lived in Iceland, intensely and often violently, some three hundred years before the saga was written. The saga is based on the authentical historical events, drawn from oral traditions and occasional written records, but it is given much life by the artistic creativity of the anonymous author. With the loss of Icelandic independence in 1262, it is unlikely that the author was unaffected by these events in his lifetime; as Iceland saw years of savage internal strife, murderous intrigues, and ruthless self-seeking power-politics. At a time when his land was disrupted by these horrific events, in *Njál saga* the author looked back to an age when a man's pride and honour were more dearly prized possessions

[21] Ibidem, 16.

than (personal) wealth or even life itself.[22] To summarize: the plot of *Njál's saga* is at its core the tragedy of the influential farmer and sage, Njál Thorgeirsson of Bergthorsknoll, who with his family is burned alive in his home by a confederacy of enemies. The story and consequences, leading up to this tragic end, spill over to many countries of Europe, and is set to be the main theme.[23]

Now back to honour. There are some instances where kingship of some sort crossed with honour. In one episode for example, Earl Hakon demanded Thrain to tell him where Hrapp was, who had stolen from the earl's temple and had killed three of his soldiers. Thrain said that he did not know where Hrapp was, however Thrain was not entirely truthful. Earl Hakon told Thrain the following:

> 'We are searching for a man called Hrapp, an Icelander. He has done us every conceivable injury. We want to ask you to hand him over or tell us where he is'.

Thrain replied:

> 'You will remember, my lord', said Thrain, 'how I killed an outlaw for you; I risked my life to do it, and in return you honoured me greatly'.

Earl Hakon replied:

> 'You shall have still greater honour this time'.[24]

This is a short episode, but still an intriguing one. Earl Hakon and Thrain met on Thrain's ship. As Earl Hakon demanded Thrain to give him information about Hrapp's location, Thrain called on his established honour with the earl to trust him. The earl thought that Thrain was lying, and he believed that Hrapp was hidden amongst the cargo of Thrain's ship. Thrain told the earl:

[22] E. Lethbridge and S. Óskarsdóttir eds., *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga: The historia mutila of Njála* (Kalamazoo 2018) 1; M. Magnusson and H. Pálsson trans., *Njal's Saga* (Harmondsworth 1960) 9-10.
[23] Magnusson trans., *Njal's Saga*, 11-14.
[24] Ibidem, 191.

"Where could I have hidden him, my lord […] I do not want you to accuse me of lying, my lord".[25] Thrain could not accept that the earl would hint openly at him lying. The earl eventually gave up, but he knew that Hrapp was hidden on the ship. Eventually the saga indeed shows that Hrapp was hiding on Thrain's ship. Therefore, Thrain was not only lying, but he also used his established honour to defend himself. It would dishonour Thrain if he handed over Hrapp as he had accepted to protect him; the earl understands this and will not put the issue to the test. Even if Hakon knew Hrapp was on the ship, he did not act.[26]

During the High Middle Ages (the era when the sagas were composed), especially, kings acquired true honour by acting righteously, taking the advice and counsel of men who were naturally suited to do so, and maintaining the rule of law and justice. The kings' subjects showed concern for the king's honour and gave him appropriate counsel, as this was the way to acquire and defend one's own status and honour. If the king or his court violated their duties, after they had been advised and counselled repeatedly in a manner of respect towards theirs status, then force could be used to protect the values and institutions as this was a king's duty to uphold.[27] In the next section, we will look at kingship and conclude this chapter.

[25] Ibidem, 191.
[26] Ibidem, 190-192.
[27] B. Weiler, *Kingship, Rebellion and Political Culture: England and Germany, c. 1215-c. 1250* (New York 2007) 94.

## Kingship

Kings stood at the pinnacle of the game of honour. The period between the end of the first millennium and the early thirteenth century witnessed the gestation of some of Latin Europe's most important political structures. The developments that were realised in this period required elites to refashion and rethink principles and structures of governance. For example, the growth of the Kingdom of Wessex in the tenth century had a profound impact on the gradual development of a sense of England as a single polity. In places like Scandinavia and Central Europe, newly Christianised polities sought to present their distinctiveness and that their membership of a community of Christian nations was recognisable and acceptable. Across Europe, the existing elites centred on the extraction of surplus from a largely agricultural economy, with the addition of trade and urban communities. Kings were meant to be guardians of the realm. They had been entrusted by God and their subjects with upholding the law and keeping the peace. The kings were expected to use their powers not for their own advancements but on behalf of the people to protect those who could not protect themselves. Therefore, the kings had to be more powerful than any of their subjects. Claimants to the throne had to demonstrate that they had the means and moral disposition to act like the king. In reality, most kings were only as powerful as the resources they had at their disposal.[28]

Rosamond McKitterick has argued that the 'warrior element of kingship" in the early Middle Ages explains how kingship worked. It were traits like leadership, tactical ability, judgement, decisiveness, and a winning streak that inspired both trust and loyalty. Much of the effectiveness of political control might be attributed to the subjects feeling of security, or of being in strong hands. A good or successful ruler would exploit all the means of good government as a means of exerting that control. He could also overstep the conventions of good

[28] B. Weiler, *Paths to Kingship in Medieval Latin Europe, c. 950-1200* (Cambridge 2021) 28-29, 33, 36.

government, in the way of fear and tyranny, and remove himself from the bounds of the law.[29] We shall now consider the polities that provide the sagas with the landscapes in which the narrated action is sited.

*England*

In early medieval England, a king's role extended far beyond military leadership as he was expected to keep the peace and champion justice, act as a court of appeal, support the Church, and engage in ceremonial, performative actions that reinforced his position. In return, the king could anticipate significant material income and have an important say over the political community of his kingdom. The balance of these requirements varied between time and places; however, historians still do not know everything about the king's roles. Weak kingship was not in itself a bad thing. It gave room to other elements in the society, from the peasantry to the nobility. Early medieval rulers constantly faced a severe challenge when they tried to establish a lasting hegemony, especially as a significant shift in the balance of power meant engaging with a powerful external force. Anglo-Saxon kings were enthusiastic war-leaders. They extracted resources from their territories through a network of collaborating locals: ealdormen led armies and presided over courts, while thegns served the king. After 900, the thegns became an elite class who owed dignified and/or military service. The key role of war in actual politics, next to the presence of Norse actors in these politics, likely explains why the sagas as narratives often present Anglo-Saxon episodes. Important for our interest in the circulation of honour that a wider range of participants were directly involved with accessing royal power including bishops and abbots, as well as local assemblies. Officials charged with upholding the king's interests were called reeves. Higher-up reeves sometimes ran up against the interests of the ealdormen. An increasingly regular and structured district framework of these agencies took shape in the ninth century and developed far into the tenth. The administrative framework

[29] R. McKitterick ed., *The Early Middle Ages, Europe 400-1000* (Oxford 2001) 30.

enabled King Æthelred II (r. 978-1013; 1014-1016) to extract huge amounts of wealth from his people, when Anglo-Saxon England was forced to take desperate measures because of the pressure of the Viking raids.[30] As we shall see, this wealth is present in the saga narratives, as a prize and as a source of honour.

*Scandinavia*

Scandinavian kingship in the Middle Ages was both elective and hereditary; in the earlier medieval centuries, its responsibilities were more of a supernatural nature than of a practical one. A Scandinavian king had to be an arbitrator and a peace-maker, but he did not have legislative responsibilities; these were conducted by the *þing*. The *þing* was an assembly that integrated the regional chieftains, *jarlar*, and some of the freemen. A Scandinavian king only assembled the army and the fleet and received legations from foreign kingdoms. As far as the thirteenth century, the Norwegian kings did not have absolute power; their subjects played an important role in the government.[31] Given that the king did not enjoy much power, what was the basis of his legitimacy? Francesco Sangriso argues that the legitimacy of Norwegian kings in particular is related to the dynastic principle of noble blood. Sangriso explains that in the *Heimskringla*, this relation or dualism is pointed out in the conflict between King Óláfr of Norway (r. 1015-1028) and the Upplǫnd's rulers, who believe themselves to be fully entitled to gain the royal power as they are *óðalbornir* (men with hereditary rights): "Now in no respect does he [King Óláfr] have a better chance than any one of us, but rather the less in that we have some lands and power to employ, but he has none at all. We are also no less entitled to kingship by birth".[32]

[30] R. Naismith, *Early Medieval Britain, c. 500-1000* (Cambridge 2021) 468-472.
[31] A. Airinei,'Pre-Christian Scandinavian Royalty. From the Legendary Kings to the 11th Century Kingship', *The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies* 6:2 (2014) 95-104, here 97.
[32] *Heimskringla II*, in Bjarni Aðalbjanarson ed., *Heimskringla II* (Reykjavik 2002) 48; F. Sangriso,'The Inviolable Right: Property and Power in Medieval Scandinavian Laws and Society' in: T. Gobbitt, *Culture in the Middle Ages* (Boston 2021) 220-249, here 240-241.
Nú hefir hann í engan stað meira kost en einn hver várr, en því minna, at vér hǫfum nǫkkur lǫnd ok ríki til forráða, en hann hefir alls engi. Erum vér ok eigi síðr óðalbornir til konungdóms.

Before the sagas, the only written records on Scandinavian kingship were a handful of runic inscriptions (2nd - 11th century) and skaldic verse (9th – 11th century). Dagfinn Skre argues that kings were members of a royal lineage that was associated with lands and peoples, but their authority and polity type varied. The Scandinavian term *konungr* ('king', the equivalent of *rex*) suggested that there was no uniform idea of kingship among the Germanic peoples at the time. Under shifting conditions, kings and other types of rulers before them, will have navigated between personal ambitions, acute constraints and opportunities, their polity's legal tradition, interests among the aristocracy, popular consensus expressed at assemblies (the *þing* for example), possible rivals within royal lineages, and the constant modelling and remodelling of the institution of kingship in the High Middle Ages.[33]

This chapter aimed to establish both the meaning of "honour" and "kingship". Honour was very important in the Icelandic sagas and was at stake in any social interaction. This chapter discusses honour in episodes of seating arrangement, acts of sexuality and an occasion where kings were not central to honour. Kingship played an important role in the game of honour. Elites were required to refashion and rethink principles and structures of governance. It were warrior-like traits that inspired both trust and loyalty. The use of a social formula[34] of honour can make it a bit clearer for the sagas that were used in this analysis. *Ljósvetninga saga*:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| Gudmund's thingman | The seat of honour | Gudmund (honour) Ofeig (dishonour, what he believes) |

[33] D. Skre ed., *Rulership in 1st to 14th Century Scandinavia: Royal Graves and at Avaldsnes and Beyond* (Berlin and Boston 2020) 196-198.
[34] The "giver of honour", the (im)material transaction, and the receiver.

*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| Aslaug | Her trust and a healthy child | Ragnar |
| Ragnar | A marriage to a king | Aslaug |

*Njál's saga*:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| Thrain | Hrapp | Hakon (although this does not really happen) |
| Hakon | Trust | Thrain (by not calling him a liar) |

## 2. The use of honour in its portrayal of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian Kings in the Icelandic Kings' Sagas

This chapter will analyse how honour played a role with the portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the Icelandic family sagas. This chapter will feature episodes of the *Fagrskinna*, *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*, and *The Knýtlinga saga*. Important to look at are the givers of honour, the form of the transaction of honour and the receivers of honour.

### *Fagrskinna*

The *Fagrskinna* is an Icelandic kings' saga written around the early thirteenth century. The saga recounts the early history of the kingdom of Norway before King Hákon Hákonarson (also known as Hákon IV or Hákon the Old, r. 1204-1263). The *Fagrskinna*, mentioned a young Athelstan, a king in England, who is also referred to as Aðalsteinn góði (Athelstan the Good). Aðalsteinn "was then one of the highest in rank in the northern lands".[35] At a certain moment, Athelstan (r. 924-939) sent his men to Norway to see King Haraldr with a message. The messengers went before King Haraldr and gave him a decorated sword.[36]

> The messenger held out the sword hilt to the king and spoke thus: 'Here is the sword that Aðalsteinn, King of the English, has sent you as a gift, my lord king.' The king took hold of the haft, and at once the messenger said: 'Now you have accepted it as our king wished, and you shall now be his servant and receiver of his sword.' King Haraldr realised that the gift had been sent in mockery; he thought carefully and asked his counsellors whether the messenger should be killed, or the king put to shame in some other way; he had no wish to be subject to him or to any man in the world. […] The next summer King Haraldr sent a ship west to England, and got his best friend, Haukr hábrók (Long-leg), to

[35] *Fagrskinna*, in A. Finlay trans., *Fagrskinna, A Catalogue of the Kings of Norway: A Translation with Introduction and Notes* (Leiden 2004) 1-335, here 52.
[36] Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 1-2.

> command it. King Haraldr put into his charge a boy who had been born of his bondwoman, Þóra morstǫng. She came from a family in Mostr in South Hǫrðaland. This boy was called Hákon, and his mother claimed that he was the son of King Haraldr.[37]

The *Fagrskinna* presents this episode as one of a gift-exchange between King Athelstan and King Haraldr. The circulation of gifts was in fiction and fact a critical element in Scandinavian culture. To cite William Ian Miller: "In the honor-based culture of the saga Iceland the world of gifts corresponded point for point with the universe of honor and blood […] men who gave gifts were men of honor […] the idiom of gifts, of repayment and requital, served also as the idiom of honor and feud".[38] Miller continues to explain that a gift "reduced the person's status relative to you […] it is the debtor who wills his lower status".[39] We shall see however that it could also be interpreted differently, as honouring the recipient. If we follow Miller here, Athelstan with his gift meant to reduce or insult Haraldr's royal status. To protect his status and honour, Haraldr was obligated to send a gift back to Athelstan. The Norwegian king delegated his best friend Haukr hábrók to England.[40] When Haukr arrived at the English court and received an audience with the king, he brought forward Hákon, and a conversation followed:

> Then King Aðalsteinn said, 'Whose is this child?' Then Haukr replied, 'He belongs to a slave-woman in Norway, and King Haraldr said that you were to bring up her child.' The king answered, 'This boy does not have slave's eyes.' Haukr said, 'The mother is a slave, and she says that King Haraldr is the father, and now the boy is your foster-son, king, and is entitled to the same care from you as your own son.' The king answered, 'Why would I bring up a child for Haraldr, even if it were his wife's child, much less a slave-woman's child,' and with one hand he reached for a sword which lay beside him, and with the other

[37] Ibidem, 52.
[38] Miller, *Humiliation,* 16.
[39] Ibidem, 17.
[40] Finlay, *Fagrskinna,* 52.

> hand seized the child. Then Haukr said, 'You have just fostered Haraldr's son, King, and set him on your knee, and you can murder him now if you wish, but you will not be able to get rid of all King Haraldr's sons any the sooner for that, and it will still be said in future as it has been until now, that the man who brings up another's child is of lower status'.[41]

Haraldr's gift was meant as an insult to Athelstan's honour. Miller argues that the power of humiliation did not always lay with the giver, in the case of the sword, with Athelstan:

> The power to make another your debtor, however, did not mean that all the power to humiliate lay with the giver. The moral and social risk of nonreciprocity is not the recipient's alone […] And once [a gift] was accepted he […] risked the insult of humiliating returns. [...] A gift to a person of very high rank could be repaid simply by its acceptance.[42]

In the conclusion of this episode, Athelstan – so says the saga – raised the boy at his court, who ends up being called Aðalsteinsfóstri (Athelstan's foster-son).[43]

In the end, Harald was able to defend his honour by sending Athelstan an insulting gift in return. This is explicated when Haukr said that "the man who brings up another's child is of lower status".[44] This episode from the *Fagrskinna* shows that gift-exchange was an important indicator of a king's honour in the Icelandic kings' sagas. As we shall see, this episode in the *Fagrskinna* was far from being the only example of gift-exchange in the kings' sagas.

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[41] Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 53.
[42] Miller, *Humiliation*, 18.
See also: W.I. Miller,'Gift, Sale, Payment, Raid: Case Studies in the Negotiation and Classification of Exchange in Medieval Iceland', *Speculum* 61:1 (1986) 18-50, here 23-24.
[43] Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 52-54; Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 34-35.
[44] Finlay, *Fagrskinna*, 53.

## *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*

The saga of Harldr hárfagri (King Haraldr Hálfdanarson Fair-hair, r. 850-932) is the first saga in the *Heimskringla* that relates the first dealings between English and Norwegian kings. This first dealing was between King Athelstan and King Haraldr Fair-hair. Athelstan played an important role in the saga of Harldr hárfagri.[45] Athelstan was called "the Victorious and the True Believer". An episode in the saga contains a version of the gift-exchange told in the *Fagrskinna*. Like in the *Fagrskinna*, King Haraldr of Norway received a gift from King Athelstan.[46]

> Æthelstan was the name of the king who had at that time succeeded to the throne of England. He was called the Victorious and the True Believer. He sent emissaries to the court of King Harald with a message delivered in this wise. The emissary went up to the king, handing him a sword adorned with gold on hilt and haft and having its scabbard ornamented with gold and silver and set with precious stones. The emissary offered the king the sword hilt and spoke these words, "Here is the sword which King Æthelstan asks you to receive from him." Then the king took hold of the haft, whereupon the messenger said, "Now you seized the sword in the fashion our king desired you would, and now you shall be his liegeman since you seized hold of his sword." King Harald then understood that this was done in mockery; but he did not relish to be the subject of anyone. Yet, as was his habit, he bore in mind to control his temper whenever rage or fury would overcome him, and thus to let his anger blow off and look at matters dispassionately. So he did also now. He brought this up before his friends, and they all agreed on what to do; and first of all they decided to let the emissary fare home unharmed.[47]

[45] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 34.
[46] Sturluson, *Heimskringla II.*, 92.
[47] Ibidem, 92.

This first part of the gift-exchange is very similar to its counterpart in the *Fagrskinna*. Still, there are some noticeable differences. The interaction between the Anglo-Saxon emissaries and Haraldr seems to be a bit more straightforward in its pronunciation. This can be pointed out with: "[…] and now you shall be his liegeman since you seized hold of his sword. King Harald then understood that this was done in mockery; but he did not relish to be the subject of anyone". Snorri wanted to make clear that the gift was meant to harm Haraldr's royal status and honour.[48] Another example is the way how Haraldr reacted to the gift: "Yet, as was his habit, he bore in mind to control his temper whenever rage or fury would overcome him, and thus to let his anger blow off and look at matters dispassionately". In the parallel episode, the *Fagrskinna* does not mention Haraldr's usual bad temper. It can be presumed that Snorri emphasised on Haraldr's bad temper to show how important gift-exchange was in the Icelandic world. Another reason can be Snorri's aim to entertain his reader, as it brings a more human dimension to this episode.

*The saga of Harldr hárfagri* continues. Here too King Æthelstan received a gift.

> Then Hauk seized the boy [Hákon] and placed him on Æthelstan's knee. The king looked at the boy and asked Hauk why he did this. Hauk answered, "King Harald bade you foster for him the son of his maidservant." The king flew into a rage and seized the sword at his side and drew it as though he would kill the boy. "You have set him upon your knee," said Hauk, "and you may murder him if you so wish, but in doing so you will not do away with all sons of King Harald." Then Hauk and all his men left the hall and made their way to their ship. They sailed out to sea as soon as they could make ready and returned to Norway and King Harald, and he was well pleased with the outcome, for people say that he is a lesser man who fosters a child for someone. In such dealings between the kings

[48] Ibidem, 92.

> one could see that each one wanted to be superior to the other. But neither lost in dignity because of this, each being the supreme king of his own domains until his dying day.[49]

Again, the tone of this episode is far more straightforward than in the *Fagrskinna*. Like Haraldr, Athelstan also has a stronger reaction upon receiving his gift: “The king flew into a rage and seized the sword at his side and drew it as though he would kill the boy. "You have set him upon your knee," said Hauk, "and you may murder him if you so wish, but in doing so you will not do away with all sons of King Harald”.[50] It cannot be a coincidence that both kings show a stronger reaction. The importance of gift-exchange or entertaining purpose are likely to be the reasons for this difference.

The most interesting section of this episode are the last two sentences: “In such dealings between the kings one could see that each one wanted to be superior to the other. But neither lost in dignity because of this, each being the supreme king of his own domains until his dying day”.[51] At first sight, this ending seems to be a bit contradictory to the main tone of the episode. But when looking closer, it becomes more interesting than one would think. Miller explains:

> Obviously not all gifts were insults. People enjoyed giving and receiving, and they gave to those they wished to honor and to those they liked and loved. But inherent in the gift is the power to annoy as well as to please, the capacity of challenge as well as to comfort. […] By knowing how to negotiate the maze of possible meanings, the astute giver could disarm the gift of hostile potential, because it was absolutely clear that gifts had hostile potential. […] A gift not costly enough might harbor an insult as to the recipient’s status or his capacity to repay.[52]

[49] Ibidem, 93.
[50] Ibidem, 93.
[51] Ibidem, 93.
[52] Miller, *Humiliation*, 17.

This makes us understand that gift-exchange was not always meant to insult. Neither Athelstan nor Haraldr lost his "dignity" in the conclusion of the gift-exchange. The *saga of Harldr hárfagri* imagined that Haraldr became aware that his sword was meant to dishonour him. Haraldr could have sent Athelstan nothing at all or a gift that held far less value. The fact that Haraldr gave Athelstan his child he conceived with a maidservant shows that he did not want to insult Athelstan with a gift not costly enough, as Athelstan also did with his gift. As the saga explains that neither king was dishonoured by their gifts shows that gift-exchange in the Iceland sagas was not always imagined as insult. While the kings could have wanted to annoy or dishonour each other, at the same time the costly gifts also showed a power of pleasing, challenging and comforting.[53]

[53] Ibidem, 17-18.

## *The Knýtlinga saga*

The *Knýtlinga saga* is a medieval chronicle of the kings of Denmark covering the period from the tenth century to the end of the twelfth. It begins with the reign of Harald Bluetooth (ca. 940) being the first king of Denmark. The saga ends with Knut Vàldimarsson, who reigned over Denmark from 1182 to 1202.[54]

The *Knýtlinga saga* contains multiple poems that were recited by the skálds Thord Kolbeinsson, Ottar the Black and Sigvat. Skalds or *skáld* were early Norwegian court poets of kings and *jarls*. Subsequently, with the settlement of Iceland, skálds were also Icelanders who became specialists in court poetry. Because of their partial Icelandic origin, poets were also portrayed by important characters in the *Íslendingasögur* such as Egil and Gunnlaug. The narrative of these protagonists were highlighted with their "honourable relations' with foreign rulers. Poets, who were usually men, often competed with one another over a woman. However, poets also competed with each other to gain affection from the king, over poetry and personal honour, and sometimes over erotic attention from each other.[55]

The England episodes of the *Knýtlinga saga* mostly focus on the reigns of Knut the Great (r. 1014, 1016-1035), Edmund II Ironside (the son of King Æthelred II the Unready, r. 1016), and King Svein Forkbeard (r. 986-1014). The *Knýtlinga saga* begins with the story of Knut in 1014. At that time, his father King Svein Forkbeard had died (3 February 1014). Since Knut's brother Harald was already dead, Knut was made king of Denmark and all the lands that Denmark ruled. The English gathered an army of their own and tried to fight the Danes.[56] Skáld Thord Kolbeinsson is recited (or imagined) as telling the following:

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[54] *Knýtlinga Saga,* in H. Pálsson and P. Edwards trans., *Knýtlinga Saga: The History of the Kings of Denmark* (Odense 1986) 1-197, here 9.
[55] R.G. Poole ed., *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets* (Berlin; New York 2001) 3, 301, 331.
[56] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 44; Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 27-29.

For ages were the English
eaten up with hatred
of the raven-feeders
who foraged with their fleet:
but the farmers, fretting
to defend their fields
stood firm: fiercely
the King's men faced them.[57]

Thord explains that the English population resisted the invading Danish enemy. Knut fought the English at Lindsey, Hemmingborough, and Northumberland on the river Tees. Skáld Ottar the Black recited the following:

Great one you grappled
on the green field of Lindsey,
you crushed your victims,
vikings won the victory.
In broad Hemmingborough,
bloodshedder of Swedes, you
laid waste the English
west of Ouse-waters.[58]

The information given by Thord and Ottar in these two *stanzas* could fit in two phases of the war. After the death of Svein, Knut and the people of Lindsey were surprised with the unexpected arrival of King Æthelred and his full force. Lindsey was then ravaged, and Knut was forced to retreat. Another alternative is to consider 1016, when Knut rapidly expanded northward, which he undertook so as to strike at the homeland of the Northumbrian Earl Uthred and broke up his alliance with the new Anglo-Saxon king, Edmund Ironside. By reading Thord's poem, it can be presumed that considerable English casualties and localized resistance

[57] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 30.
[58] Ibidem, 30.

to Knut's advance might well have occurred, despite the fact that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is silent on that score. The *Chronicle* does not give an indication that Knut advanced further north than York. After Uthred's submission and murder, Knut appointed a new earl of Northumbria. However, as the *Chronicle* mentions Uthred and Northumbria, it can be presumed that Ottar was not mistaken in his mentioning of the Tees in his poem. Both he and Thord, however, might have had good reasons to exaggerate their leaders' control over Northumbria in 1016. The new earl's rule was contested as Anglo-Saxon nobles had stated that Earl Uthred was succeeded by his brother Eadwulf.[59] No matter what the *Knýtlinga saga* and the *Chronicle* told about the events of the early eleventh century, the skálds honoured King Knut with poems about his war-exploits and courage.

When Edmund ascended the throne with his brothers, he was in open conflict with the Danish invaders led by Svein Forkbeard's son, King Knut.[60] King Edmund gathered a great army and marched against King Knut. They met at a place called Sherston in one of the most famous battles of the time. King Edmund charged straight into the heart of the Danish army, to within striking distance of his step-father, King Knut. Knut thrust forward his shield right over the neck of his horse and the stroke landed on the shield just below the handgrip with such force that it sliced right through the shield, and horse too, as deep as the shoulder. After that, the Danes attacked Edmund so fiercely that he had to retreat to his own ranks, though he had killed a good many of the Danes without suffering much in the way of wounds himself. When King Edmund's charge had taken him out of sight of his men, they thought he must have been killed, being unable to see him. Then they broke ranks and ran, though some of them caught a glimpse of the king riding away from the Danes. However, they all fled, even those who had seen him, and though the king shouted to them to turn back no-one showed any sign of hearing him. The

[59] R.G. Poole,'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History: Some Aspects of the Period 1009-1016', *Speculum* 62:2 (1987) 265-298, here 272-273.
[60] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 31.

whole English army was routed, and a terrible slaughter followed. With the Danes pursuing the fleeing troops until nightfall.[61] Ottar recited a poem about Sherston:

> Young warrior, it was you
> made them yield, those Angles,
> you toppled them at the Tees,
> where the trench with Northumbrian
> corpses was cluttered,
> then southward the crow's
> sleep was unsettled
> by Svein's son at Sherston.[62]

In the battle of Sherston Edmund's heroic actions accidentally result in a crushing English defeat. Ottar's poem about the battle of Sherston brings up some vagueness in its grammatical layer. The sentences of "then southward the crow's" can be unclear to some, as it can refer to as "further south" or a "southern phase" of Knut's campaign.[63]

After the battle of Sherston, King Edmund and King Knut fought three more battles. The first battle was fought at a town named Brentford where the English once again were routed by the Danes who also destroyed the fortress.[64] In verses reproduced in the saga, the skáld Ottar the Black recounted the battle thusly:

> Shield-smasher, the Frisians
> you flattened, no friendship
> when you crushed the castle
> and their cottages at Brentford.
> Cruel the cuts suffered
> by the kinsman of Edmund,

[61] Ibidem, 31-32.
[62] Ibidem, 32.
[63] Poole,'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', 273-274.
This battle of Sherston was also written up in remarkably similar way in the *Ólafs konungs Haraldssonar Saga*. Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 45.
[64] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 34.

as Danish spears
showered down on the shambles.[65]

The *Chronicle* agreed on locating an important battle at Brentford, but not in the result it gave: two days after King Edmund had relieved the citizens of London, under siege by Knut, and sent the Vikings fleeing to their ships and met them again at Brentford. However, the *Chronicle* does not mention that Knut established a position at Brentford, which was the likeliest place for Edmund to cross the Thames and follow his pursuit. The presence of the Frisians cannot be confirmed by other sources; they probably were supporters of Edmund, but alternatively they may have been using the Thames for trade and were accidentally caught up in the fighting as a promising source of Viking plunder. It can be suggested that Ottar also used propaganda in his poem. As he attempted to 'cover up' the ignominy of the Danish retreat. His reasons could have been fortified in doing so by the knowledge that the flight, though real, was only a temporary setback. This can be argued by the fact that the *Chronicle* tells us that the Danes immediately resumed the siege of London, while Edmund, seriously delayed by the heavy casualties on his side, withdrew to Wessex.[66] The following battle between Knut and Edmund, a major one, was at a place called Ashington. This battle was also a Danish victory.[67] Ottar versified as follows:

At Ashington, you worked well
in the shield-war, warrior-king;
brown was the flesh of bodies
served to the blood-bird:
in the slaughter, you won,
sire, with your sword
enough of a name there,
north of the Danes' Woods.[68]

[65] Ibidem, 34.
[66] Poole,'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', 274-275.
[67] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 34.
[68] Ibidem, 34-35.

This poem also raises some questions: the location of "north of the Danes' Woods" is unclear. Ottar might have meant a forest south of Ashington, or it was intended as a separate battle altogether. Ottar also seems to have mistaken the title of "warrior-king" he gave in Knut's honour. Ottar incorrectly told us that Knut's title, won at Ashington, was won by armed warfare and not negotiations.[69]

The third battle was again fought between King Knut and King Edmund and his brothers at Norwich. This great battle also saw the death of many soldiers. Again, King Knut won the battle and Edmund, and his brothers' army once again routed.[70] Ottar says the following:

> You bloodied the breastplates,
> O bountiful, at Norwich:
> better killed than accused
> of lacking courage.[71]

Peace was eventually agreed upon and it was decided that England was to be divided between the English and the Danes. Each controlled half of the kingdom, and if either would die without issue, the survivor would get the whole kingdom. This agreement was confirmed with an oath. A powerful man named Edric Strjona was bribed by King Knut to betray and murder King Edmund. After Edric had killed King Edmund, King Knut drove all of Æthelred's sons out of England and gained the whole kingdom.[72] Although nothing much is said in the saga on Edmund's murder, Sigvat recited a short poem about the events:

> Knut the King
> soon crushed the sons
> of Æthelred, cleared them

[69] Poole,'Skaldic Verse and Anglo-Saxon History', 275-276.
[70] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 35.
[71] Ibidem, 35.
[72] F. Tinti, *Europe and the Anglo-Saxons* (Cambridge 2021) 56; Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 38-39.

clean from the country.[73]

The poem tries to protect King Knut's honour as the Sigvat does not want to mention that King Knut ordered a dishonourable command to slay a king. The saga tells that King Knut was "more powerful and ruled over more territories than any other Norse-speaking king, and people called him Knut the Great, or Old Knut".[74]

After a successful campaign in Norway, Knut set out on a journey to Rome (ca. 1027) which was incredibly expensive. Not only did Knut bring many goods with him, he also was free to use the Emperor's money whenever he wanted.[75] The saga tells that: "None of his people had to beg for food while the king was on his way to Rome: and everyone who needed it had money in his pockets. From Flanders to Rome the king journeyed on foot."[76] Yet a third skáld, named Sigvat, told the following: "Few more famous gold-flingers afoot, more memorable than his mightiest of monarchs".[77]

King Knut founded multiple hostels for lodging, and he made huge donations to monasteries and other large establishments.[78] When King Knut was returning back to England, he fell ill to a sickness the saga recalls as jaundice. Knut laid in bed over the summer and died the following autumn, on 13th November in Winchester. This seems to be historically inaccurate as other sources claim he died on 12th November.[79] The saga ends explaining that "Everyone agrees that no king in Scandinavia was ever so powerful or ruled over a more wide-ranging kingdom".[80] Another episode in the *Knýtlinga saga* briefly describes Knut's generosity. The saga tells the following:

[73] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 39.
[74] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 40.
[75] The *Knýtlinga Saga* does not mention the name of the Emperor, but this would probably have been Conrad II (r. 1027-1039).
[76] Ibidem, 40.
[77] Ibidem, 40-41.
[78] Ibidem, 41.
[79] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 51; Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 41.
[80] Pálsson trans., *Knýtlinga Saga*, 41.

> There was never a king in Scandinavia more generous than Knut, for it is said in all truth that he went far beyond other kings, lavishing such riches every year in gifts to his friends; but at the same time, he took much more in annual dues and taxes from the three realms than anyone ruling over just a single kingdom, England being richer in money than any other northern land.[81]

Sigvat also gave a good insight on King Knut's generosity to his poets, as they also received honour by presents of verses:

> When we called on the king, the charismatic Knut of high deeds, he adorned and decorated our arms: gave a mark to you, or more, this wise man, and a mighty sharp sword: half a mark to me: God Almighty's our master.[82]

After Knut's death, no other king of Denmark ever obtained a lavish bounty, which had lasted for many generations.[83] Sigvat mostly recited poems on Knut's life after 1016. It still remains unclear if Sigvat's poems were written at a contemporary time.[84]

The *Knýtlinga saga* also gives a brief description of King Knut:

> Knut was exceptionally tall and strong, and the handsomest of men except for his nose which was thin, high-set and rather hooked. He had a fair complexion and fine, thick head of hair. His eyes were better than those of other men, being both more handsome and keener-sighted. He was a generous man, a great warrior, valiant, victorious and the happiest of men in style and grandeur. But he was not a man of great intelligence, and the

[81] Ibidem, 41.
[82] Ibidem, 43.
[83] Ibidem, 43.
[84] M. Townend,'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*: Skaldic Praise-Poetry at the Court of Cnut', *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001) 145-179, here 156.

same could be said of King Svein and Harald and Gorm before him, that none of them was notable for wisdom.[85]

The *Knýtlinga saga* mentions three skálds, Thord Kolbeinsson, Ottar the Black and Sigvat. Matthew Townend points out that Thord, Ottar, and Sigvat were three of the eight skálds that composed poems or *Knútsdrápa* in honour of Knut the Great. Townend argues that this poetry attests to a vibrant, multilingual court culture, its primary audience being the Danes based at Knut's court. The skaldic poetry of Knut's time provides access to readings of events, which, like the battle of Ashingdon in 1016, led to the Danish conquest of England; which was done by celebrating the king's Danish lineage and his displacement of the Anglo-Saxon kings, which are clearly pointed out in the poems by Thord, Ottar, and Sigvat. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* gives a more English perspective on the same events by speaking of the destruction of all the English nobility and by employing of a 'mournful, elegiac approach'.[86]

The poems of Thord and Ottar are not always clear, and the use of propaganda cannot be denied. They did so to honour Knut a time of his campaign in England against Edmund Ironside. While the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, usually supports the episodes of the poems, some information is exaggerated to 'cover up' some of the Danish failures of the campaign. Miller argues that: "Honor was thus, as a matter of social mathematics, acquired at someone else's expense. When yours went up, someone else's went down".[87] Following Miller's arguments, it can be considered that the poets were aware of social mathematics; as Knut's honour went up, Edmund's honour went down. Therefore, in *Knýtlinga saga* it was not extensive propaganda but just a simple form of social mathematics. The skálds recited these poems, partly, for their own benefit, but Matthew Townend thinks that there is no doubt that these poems were recited in the king's presence. The frequent use of "you" could be used to argue that poems were written

[85] Ibidem, 43.
[86] Townend,'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', 145; Tinti, *Europe and the Anglo-Saxons*, 56.
[87] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30.

to gain affection from the king.[88]

By reading the poems it is also likely that Ottar, Thord, and Sigvat competed with each other. Without the skálds, Knut's deeds would still be remembered in the saga and the *Chronicle*, but it were precisely those skálds, although may it be exaggerated, who gave Knut his honourable status. As the *Knýtlinga saga* tells the events so differently, it is obvious that honour played an important role in this difference of storytelling. The *Knýtlinga saga* shows how honour was given to a king with a different method than with the episodes of gift-exchange in the *Fagrskinna* and the *saga of Haraldr hárfagri*. It can be argued that like the skalds and the gift-givers in the kings' sagas, there was always a "giver of (dis)honour" that influenced a king's portrayal. In these cases, other kings, emissaries, and the skálds, portrayed this role of giver. Miller argues that:

> Honor was then not just a matter of the individual; it necessarily involved a group, and the group included all those people worthy of competing with you for honor. Your status in this group was the measure of your honor, and your status was achieved at the expense of the other group members who were not only your competitors for scarce honor but also the arbiters of whether you had it or not. In other words, your good standing depended on the judgements of your enemies. Your good standing was also aided by friends, not so much because of their judgement of you, but because you had them.[89]

Even if this can be considered as a form of family honour, it is still very relatable for the kings' sagas. If it were not for the defeated English or the competing kings that gave a gift to his rival, there was no way for the skálds or the author to extract honour. The good standing of one's friend and enemy is what made the kings' in the kings' sagas (dis)honourable. This dynamic will be of similar great importance in the family sagas.

[88] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 30; Townend,'Contextualizing the *Knútsdrápur*', 172.
[89] Miller, *Humiliation*, 116.

This chapter analysed how honour was portrayed by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the kings' sagas. This chapter analysed episodes in the *Fagrskinna*, *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*, and *The Knýtlinga saga*. In both the *Fagrskinna* and *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*, we looked at very similar episodes of gift-exchange between King Athelstan of England and King Haraldr of Norway. Two contrary arguments can be drawn from these episodes. In the one hand, the gift were meant as insult to the other king's honour and royal status. Both episodes clearly mention that both kings understood that the gifts were used to insult the other. Athelstan gave Haraldr a sword which projected Athelstan's superior status, and Haraldr gave Athelstan a child that he conceived with a maid. In *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*, both kings showed more emotions of insult once they received their gives, which seems logical as they thought this gift was not equal to their honourable rank of king. However, at the other hand, gifts did not always insult one. A gift could be used to annoy or please one. This argument gets supported in a passage of the *saga of Haraldr hárfagri* which made clear that neither king loses any "dignity" over this gift-exchange. Both arguments have a valid case, eventually it was both the giver and receiver of honour who could determine if these gifts were in honour or dishonour of one's status. A social formula of honour for both sagas could be filled in as follows:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| King Athelstan | The decorated sword | King Haraldr |
| King Haraldr | Athelstan's foster-son | King Athelstan |

*The Knýtlinga saga* features relevant England-episodes during the reign of King Knut the Great. The analysis focused on the episodes in 1016, when Knut is on a campaign in England against the Anglo-Saxon King Edmund Ironside. Both kings fight numerous battles against each other that were both retold in the saga itself and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. *The Knýtlinga saga* recited poems of three skálds: Thord Kolbeinsson, Ottar the Black and Sigvat. These poets often praise Knut the Great in their poems and portray Edmund as an inferior king. Edmund is not

necessarily dishonourable, but the poets portray him as the weaker one of the two. A reason is that the poets somewhat "exaggerated" Knut's portrayal, which is the case with similar episodes in the *Chronicle*. It is very likely that the poems were recited in Knut's presence. Indeed, for the poets it was therefore important to win over the king's affection by honouring him at any possible moment. Although 'gift-exchange' is not presented in an obvious manner, the social formulae can still be used as one realizes that giving or receiving honour is often a form of exchange. Of course, when looking at feuds, honour is won by the victor and is not necessarily an obvious form of exchange. But when using this formula, it still makes sense:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| The poets | The praise-poems | King Knut |

## 3. Using Honour in Dealings With a King in the Family Sagas

This chapter will analyse how honour played a role with the portrayal of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the Icelandic family sagas. This chapter will feature episodes of *Egil's saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, and a brief episode of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Again, this analysis will look at important factors of the givers, the form of the transaction of honour and the receiver. As with *Njál's saga*, the family sagas will show that kings were not always at the centre of honour. Rather, it is often the skálds who, as figures, acquire honour in dealing with kings (and pass this honour on to their families).

### *Egil's saga*

*Egil's saga* is an Icelandic family saga about the life of Egil Skallagrimsson. Egil is an Icelandic farmer, Viking and skáld. The events are located between the years 850-1000 AD. The first part of the saga is set in Norway under King Harald Fine-Hair. *Egil's saga* was probably written around 1230 by Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), also the author of the *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda*. Snorri lived a while at Borg, this is where Egil farmed and spent most of his adult life in the district of Borgarfjord. As with the *Heimskringla*, *Egil's saga* shared a vision of early Scandinavian and English history, an understanding of and subtle illustration of human motives, and a narrative design that offers a panoramic view of the Viking world from the middle of the ninth century to the end of the tenth.[90]

The story of *Egil's saga* is divided into two parts. The first part describes the political tragedy of Thorolf Kveldulfsson, Egil's uncle who died before he was born, which ends with his surviving family being forced to flee the country and settle in Iceland. The second part is double the length and tells the life story of Egil. While the plot of the first part only spans

[90] *Egil's Saga*, in H. Pálsson and P. Edwards trans., *Egil's Saga* (Reading; first edition 1976) 1-253, here 7; R.G. Poole a.o. eds., *Egil, the Viking Poet: New Approaches to Egil's Saga* (Toronto 2015) 23-24.

several years of Thorolf and is entirely focused on the plot of his fall and the flight of his family, the second part spans over ninety years. The scene constantly changes in the *Egil's saga*, from its opening chapters set in Norway, to Sweden, Finland and Lapland, south to the Low Countries and west of Britain and Iceland. At his first appearance, Egil Skallagrimsson is described as an ugly, recalcitrant child, greedy for gifts and singing his own praises. At his last appearance as an old man, he is pushed around in the kitchen by serving women, but still a killer and poet, everything he does or says bears the stamp of an individual, achieved by the very multiplicity of the roles he plays. Egil is also seen as a sorcerer, his knowledge of runes can cure sickness; he is an ingenious lawyer and a raging drunk, a wanderer on the face of the earth and a settled farmer, an enemy king over family honour and a miser, a "Machiavelli" and a puppet.[91]

In *Egil's saga* a number of kings are mentioned. The most important ones are Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan (Aðalsteinn; r. 924/25-939) and Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway (r. 931-933, 947-948, 952-954).[92] The saga will show that both kings had differing relationships with Egil. Egil helped Athelstan in a time of military urgency and became good friends with the king. With king Eirik, it goes less well: the elder Thorolf (as Egil's brother is also called Thorolf), Egil's uncle, was killed by Eirik's father, King Harald of Norway in the first part of the saga. In an episode where Egil is still a young man, he took revenge by killing a favourite retainer of the new king and queen Eirik and Gunnhild. Thus, former enmities are re-established. The saga establishes that Egil is a poet. Concluding from the findings in the kings' sagas, it is important to understand that Egil, as a skáld, was also able to honour a king. The saga shows that Egil can be considered a "giver of honour", let us see how.[93]

In *Egil's saga*, King Æthelstan (Aðalsteinn) is one of the main characters and a protagonist. Throughout the saga, Æthelstan's good relationship with Egil, is a theme as the

[91] Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 7; Poole, *Egil, the Viking Poet*, 24-25.
[92] King Eirik also ruled Northumbria between 947-948 and 952-954.
[93] Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 16.

king helps in Egil's character development. In the narrative, their dealings are prefaced by the great battle of Vin-Heath (925 CE).[94]

Ólaf the King of the Scots is Athelstan's most important rival in this uprising.[95] At this time Egil and his brother Thorolf decided to cut short on a Viking expedition and join King Athelstan's army, along with their own men, as mercenaries.[96] When both brothers arrive, Athelstan is immediately impressed by their formidable presence:

> Thorolf and his brother Egil sailed southwards to Saxony and Flanders where they learned that the King of England needed troops and the rewards were likely to be high. So they made up their minds to go, and travelled over autumn till they reached King Athelstan. He gave them a good welcome and it seemed to him their support would be a great asset to his army.[97]

This passage gives a great first insight into the start of a good relationship between Athelstan and Egil. The first stages of this war are characterized by the gathering of more men and by tactical delays on both sides. Egil and his men sent messengers to King Ólaf to say that King Athelstan would like to propose to fight a decisive battle at Vínheiðr. Ólaf accepted Egil's offer, and the battle was set to commence after a week. The location at Vínheiðr is described as a level plain flanked by forest on one side and a river on the other side. King Athelstan's army tried to take advantage of this geography; they arranged for their tents to be pitched where the

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[94] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 70.

[95] When the young Athelstan succeeds the throne, he is described as a weaker monarch than his ancestors:
After Athelstan took over the kingdom a number of chieftains who had lost their authority to his forebears started to make war against him, thinking it easy to get back what they had lost now that a young king ruled. These chieftains were Welsh, Scots and Irish / En er Aðalsteinn hafði tekit konungdóm þá hófusk upp til ófriðar þeir hǫfðingjar er áðr hǫfðu látit ríki sín fyrir þeim langfeðgum; þótti nú sem dælst mundi til at kalla er ungr konungr réð fyrir ríki; váru þat bæði Bretar ok Skotar ok Írar.
Athelstan faced uprisings from the Welsh, Scots and Irish and began to raise an army.
*Egil's Saga,* in B. Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga* (London 2003) 1-302, here 71; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 116.

[96] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 70.

[97] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 71; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 116.
Þeir bræðr Þórólfr ok Egill heldu suðr fyrir Saxland ok Flæmingjaland; þá spurðu þeir at Englandskonungr þóttisk liðs þurfa ok þar var ván féfangs mikils; gera þeir þá þat ráð at halda þangat liði sínu. Fóru þeir þá um haustit til þess er þeir kómu á fund Aðalsteins konungs; tók hann vel við þeim ok leizk svá á at liðsemð mikil mundi vera at fylgð þeira.

forest is closest to the river and set them up in a way that it was impossible to see how many tents there really were. Many of these tents were actually empty to trick Ólaf into thinking that Athelstan's army outnumbers his. English messengers tried to further delay Ólaf as Athelstan is in the south of England. When Athelstan arrived with an army from the south, he offered peace to Ólaf. The Scottish king agreed if he would get money and Northumbria. Before a battle would commence, Egil conducted a poem to his own men about the negotiations between Athelstan and Ólaf:

> One earl fled from Olaf,
> life ended for the other;
> the lusty war-leader
> was lavish in blood-gifts.
> England's enemy conquered
> half Alfgeir's earldom,
> while the great Godrek
> rambled on the gore-plain.[98]

While there is no following commentary on this poem in the saga, the poems are fairly faithful to the actual events described earlier. Egil was praising the opponent, to heighten the later honour of fighting. Two Welsh defectors, Hringr and Aðils[99] suggested to Ólaf that he should launch a surprise night-attack against Athelstan's army. Ólaf agreed and launched the attack. But when nearing Athelstan's camp their army was spotted by Egil and Thorolf and the rebel army was eventually defeated.[100] After failed negotiations and a surprise attack by Oláf army, Athelstan gave one last message to the Scottish envoys:

[98] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 73-74; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 119.
Óláfr of kom jöfri, ótt víg, á bak flótta, þingharðan spyr ek þengil þann, en felldi annan. Glapstígu lét gnóga Goðrekr á mó troðna. Jörð spenr Englaskerðir Álfgeirs und sik hálfa.
[99] While both earls names sound Norse, the saga does not give an explanation.
[100] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 71.

> ‘Carry this message to King Olaf,’ he said, ‘that I give him leave to go back with all his men to Scotland, but that he must give up everything that he has plundered here in the land. After that we can declare a peace between our kingdoms, and neither shall attack the other. But it follows from this that Olaf must become my liegeman and govern Scotland on my behalf as tributary king. Now go back and tell him how things stand’.[101]

While Athelstan was at this point in an uncertain position, it can be assumed that he eagerly wanted to regain the honour he lost after his enemies had raided and conquered parts of his kingdom. As Ólaf was not going to give in to these demands, the following day preparations for the main battle began. King Athelstan proposed that Egil and Thorolf led separate divisions of his army. Egil was not very fond of the idea, but Thorolf was more compliant with the king’s wishes. King Athelstan led a division against his Scottish counterpart. The battle resulted in a victory for Athelstan and the defeat and death of King Ólaf of Scotland. But on the English side, Thorolf was killed due to an ambush from the forest and Egil buried him afterwards. When Thorolf was placed in his grave, Egil clasped gold bracelets on each of his brother’s arms. Then Thorolf’s grave was sealed with stones and earth. Egil made a verse:

> The earl’s killer,
> Who cringed to no man,
> Fell, the fierce Thorolf
> Fighting like a warrior.
> beneath Vina’s green bank
> Lie my brother's bones,
> Sore is my sorrow

[101] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 75-76; Pálsson trans., *Egil’s Saga*, 121.
En Aðalsteinn konungr veitti skjótan órskurð um þetta mál ok sagði sendimönnum svá: "Berið þau orð mín Óláfi konungi, at ek vil gefa honum orlof til þess at fara heim til Skotlands með lið sitt, ok gjaldi hann aptr fé þat allt, er hann tók upp at rǫngu hér í landi; setjum hér síðan frið í millum landa várra ok heri hvárigir á aðra. Þat skal ok fylgja at Óláfr konungr skal gerast minn maðr ok halda Skotland af mér ok vera undirkonungr minn. Farið nú," segir hann, "aptr ok segið honum svá búit."

Though 1 show no grief.[102]

Egil continued with another verse:

West over water
I wallowed in the slain-stack,
Angry, my Adder struck
Adils in the battle-storm.
Olaf played the steel-game;
The English his enemies;
Hring sought the raging blades,
No ravens went hungry.[103]

With these verses honouring his brother, Egil struggled with his emotions over the loss of Thorolf. He was not really sad ("Sore is my sorrow Though 1 show no grief") but he was very angry towards his enemies ("No ravens went hungry"). During the battle Athelstan is portrayed as a king who does not shy away from battle: he was actively commanding and gathering troops.[104] The saga tells that: "Early in the morning King Athelstan roused his troops and called together his leaders, explaining how he wanted his army deployed".[105]

Egil plays the role of a "giver of honour" towards King Athelstan, while also playing the role of "receiver of honour" as Athelstan gives him honour in return. After the battle, King Athelstan invited Egil to sit next to him at the banquet. As early established before by Miller, seating arrangements showed which individuals, whom had the most honour, could sit close to the king. In Egil's case, King Athelstan acknowledged him as a man of honour. Athelstan

[102] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 80; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 127-128.
Gekk sá er óðisk ekki jarlmanns bani snarla, þreklundaðr fell, Þundar, Þórólfr, í gný stórum. Jǫrð grœr, en vér verðum, Vínu nær of mínum, helnauð er þat, hylja harm, ágætum barma.
[103] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 80; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 128.
Valkǫstum hlóðk vestan vang fyrir merkistangir; ótt var él þat er sóttak Aðils bláum Naðri. Háði ungr við Engla Áleifr þrimu stála. Helt, ne hrafnar sultu, Hringr á vápna þingi.
[104] Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England in Icelandic Medieval Texts*, 72.
[105] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 71; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 125.
Aðalsteinn konungr vakði upp her sinn þegar um morgininn árdegis; hann átti tal við hǫfðingja sína ok sagði hver skipun vera skyldi fyrir liði hans.

rewarded Egil with a bracelet he had hung on the point of his sword. After Egil received his gift, he made a verse to honour Athelstan:

> The King in his coat
> Of steel sets this gold coil,
> This ring, on my right arm
> Where falcons have rested:
> The gift hangs glowing,
> My arm its gallows:
> Honour was earned
> By the feasier of eagles.[106]

This verse showed how important gift-exchanges were. While Egil performed an honourable service "Honour was earned", Athelstan rewarded him equally. Furthermore, Athelstan had brought two chests filled with silver carried into the hall. Athelstan then said:

> 'These chests are for you, Egil,' said the King. 'When you get back to Iceland I want you to give them to your father from me, in compensation for his son's life, though some of the money is to be shared between the kinsmen of you and Thorolf, the ones you think the greatest men. As compensation for yourself I want you to take either land or movables, whichever suits you best, and if you choose to stay long with me, I offer you a place of honour and worth. You only have to say what you want'.[107]

To give a choice for the form of compensation is honouring one's counterpart. A parallel can be found in the saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, where the king of Northumbria, fearing Ivar the

[106] *Egil´s Saga*, ch. 50. See Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 81; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 129.
Hrammtangar lætr hanga hrynvirgil mér brynju Hǫðr á hauki troðnum heiðis vingameiði. Rítmœðis kná ek reiða, ræðr gunnvala bræðir, gelgju seil á gálga geirveðrs, lofi at meira.
[107] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 82; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 129.
Kistur þessar, Egill, skaltu hafa, ok ef þú kemr til Íslands, skaltu fœra þetta fé fǫður þínum; í sonargjǫld sendi ek honum; en sumu fé skaltu skipta með frændum ykrum fiórólfs þeim er þér þikja ágætastir. En þú skalt taka hér bróðurgjǫld hjá mér, lǫnd eða lausa aura, hvárt er þú vill heldr, ok ef þú vilt með mér dveljask lengðar þá skal ek hér þá þér sœmð ok virðing þá er þú kannt mér sjálfr til segja.

Boneless, gave him free choice of compensation for his father's death.[108] When Ivar appeared before King Ælla (r.862-867 and called Ella in the saga), he greeted and addressed the king thusly:

> "I have come to thee to sue for reconciliation with thee and for such honor as thou wilt grant me. I see now that I am no match for thee, and it seems better to me to take from thee such honor as thou wilt offer me than to lose the lives of more of my men, or mayhap of myself, before thee."
>
> The saga goes on:
>
> "King Ella answered, "Some men say it is not a good thing to trust thee, and thou speakest oft fair when thy thought is treacherous; it will be hard for us to guard ourselves against thee and thy brothers." [Ivar retorted:] "I ask thee for but little; if thou wilt grant it, I shall swear thee an oath never to fight against thee." Then the King asked what payment he wished. "I will," said Ivar, "that thou give me as much of thy land as an ox-hide extends over, and a foundation-wall to be built about it: no more do I ask, and I see that thou wilt do me little honor if thou wilt not grant me that." "I do not know that that would do us any harm," said the King, "even though thou didst have so much of our land, and of a surety I will give it thee if thou wilt swear not to fight against me; and I do not fear thy brothers if thou art but true to me".[109]

The choice of compensation was an honourable gesture by King Ælla. The king therefore portrays himself as "a giver of honour". As is the case of King Athelstan and Egil, gift-exchange, in some sort, was present in this interaction: Ivar swore an oath that he and his army will not attack the king again while King Ælla promised some land for Ivar and Scandinavian

[108] *The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, in M. Schlauch, trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs, The Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok, together with the Lay of Kraka*, (New York; third edition 1964) 185-258, here 245.
[109] Ibidem, 245-246.

people. Ivar reminded King Ælla that it would be dishonourable if he did not grant him the land: " […] no more do I ask, and I see that thou wilt do me little honor if thou wilt not grant me that". Although King Ælla implied that rejecting Ivar's offer would do no harm to his honour, it still would have been a bad decision by Ælla if he rejected the offer anyway. The saga shows that "the giver of honour", which in this case was King Ælla, gave a choice to Ivar for the form of an honourable compensation of his father's death.[110]

But back to Egil. As Athelstan must have thought that his previous gift was not as honourable as Egil's service, he gave the Icelander another compensation of money and land which was "a place of honour and worth". As Egil grew more cheerful he made up another verse that praised Athelstan:

> In bitterness my brows
> beetled over my eyes;
> Now my forehead has found one
> To smooth its furrows:
> The King has conquered
> My louring cliff-face,
> The granter of gifts,
> The gold-flinger.[111]

In this verse, Egil acknowledged Athelstan's gift and thus assured that Athelstan's gift repaid Egil's honour. Egil stayed the winter with Athelstan. Athelstan has a high opinion for Egil. Egil also composed a poem in Athelstan's honour:

> The royal warrior rises
> Above his realm,
> The pride of three princes

[110] Ibidem, 203, 205, 245-246.
[111] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 82-83; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 130.
Knáttu hvarms af harmi hnúpgnípur mér drúpa; nú fann ek þann er ennis ósléttur þær rétti. Gramr hefir gerðihǫmrum grundar upp um hrundit, sá er til ýgr, af augum, armsíma, mér grímu.

> Ælla's stem overpowers;
> Countries are conquered
> By Athelstan the King,
> All kneel to the noble
> And generous knight.[112]

The poem also has a refrain:

> Now the Highlands, deer-bounted,
> Lie humbled by Athelstan.[113]

With this poem, Egil again gave more honour to Athelstan. The king again gave Egil gifts for his praise-poem which indicates, again, the repayment of the receiving honour. Egil decided to leave in the summer, but Athelstan did not want Egil to go away:

> 'It's for you to decide whether you go or stay, Egil,' said the King, 'if you think you've urgent matters to deal with. But I'd like it best if you were to settle down here, and choose whatever position you want.'.[114]

Again, Egil was given a choice for the form of compensation. Athelstan's pleadings for Egil to stay show how much honour the king had bestowed upon him. Unfortunately for Athelstan, Egil decided to leave, but this was not the last time they would see each other. Later in the narrative a new Viking army was raiding England, led by King Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway and Northumbria (r. 931-933, 947-948, 952-954). When Athelstan heard about this news, he gathered an army and marched against Eirik. When both the kings met, they soon decided to agree on peace. Both kings agreed that Eirik would rule Northumberland if he defended

[112] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 82-83; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 130.
Nú hefir foldgnárr fellda, fellr jǫrð und nið Ellu, hjaldrsnerrandi, harra hǫfuðbaðmr, þrjá jǫfra. Nú hefir foldgnárr fellda, fellr jǫrð und nið Ellu, hjaldrsnerrandi, harra hǫfuðbaðmr, þrjá jǫfra.
[113] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 83; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 130.
Nú liggr hæst und hraustum hreinbraut Aðalsteini.
[114] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 83; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 131.
Konungr sagði: 'Þat mun vera, Egill, á þínu forráði at fara heðan á brott ef þú þikisk eiga skyldarerendi, en hinn veg þiki mér bezt at þú takir hér staðfestu með mér ok slíka kosti sem þú vill beiðask.'.

Athelstan's country against invasions from the Irish and the Scots. As for Egil, he did not want to live his life out in Iceland and in the autumn, he decided to go back to King Athelstan. However, when he was sailing for England, he got shipwrecked by severe weather conditions alongside the coast of Northumberland. Egil had a troubled relationship with Eirik, and when he arrived in York, he was taken prisoner. When Egil was released from prison he rode to Athelstan in the south. The king welcomed Egil with pleasure and he invited Egil to stay.[115] Egil planned to leave England again, but the king made another attempt to convince Egil to stay: 'But I'd prefer you to stay here,' he said, 'and defend my country and take charge of my army. The revenues I'd grant you would be large'.[116] Eventually Athelstan gave permission for Egil to leave and gave him a fine trading ship. The saga said that Athelstan and Egil parted as best friends. Athelstan's name still comes up in the following chapters, but there is no physical portrayal of the king anymore. Egil received news that Athelstan had died and there mentions of Athelstan end.[117]

King Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway and Northumbria, and his wife Gunnhild also played a role in the saga. The saga gives the best portrayal of the king and queen in the so-called Hǫfuðlausn (Head-ransom) episode, placed after Egil's shipwreck. Egil heard that Northumberland was ruled by Eirik Bloodaxe and his wife Gunnhild, and that the king's residence was in the nearby town of York. Chieftain Arinbjorn was also present. As Egil was, since the killing of Eirik's and Gunnhild's retainer, considered an enemy by Eirik, he had a difficult choice to make. He decided to disguise himself and headed to York. Egil got an audience with Eirik in York, the king was not pleased when he saw Egil. He gave Egil a hard look and asked him why he had decided to come.[118] Egil spoke the following verse:

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[115] Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 164.
[116] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 114; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 164-165.
'en bezt þœtti mér at þú værir með mér ok gerðisk landvarnarmaðr minn ok réðir fyrir herliði mínu; mun ek fá þér veizlur stórar.'
[117] Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 165-167.
[118] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 100-101; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 151.

Headlong I came, hard-tacking
My ocean-horse
Eagerly to King Eirik
On England's isle:
Scion of the great king,
The sword-scarer greets you,
The high-couraged one,
Confronts Harald's kin.[119]

The reference to Eirik's father showed that Egil had not forgiven Harald and his kin of the murder of his uncle Thorolf. The king was still not pleased with Egil and had no reason to let him leave alive. Gunnhild urged her husband to kill Egil.[120] Arinbjorn disapproved of this execution and pleaded for Egil:

> 'I'm hoping Egil's problems will soon take a turn for the better,' said Arinbjorn. 'It's true that Egil has caused you serious offence, but bear in mind how much he's suffered himself at your hands and those of your kinsmen. Your father, King Harald, had Egil's uncle, that fine man Thorolf, put to death for no more reason than the slanderous talk of villains. You yourself, my lord, twisted the law to help Berg-Onund against Egil. On top of that you wanted him put to death, you had some of his men killed, you took all his money from him, and made him an outlaw and drove him out of the country - but Egil's not a man to play games with. Every case has to be judged on its merits. I'm taking Egil home with me now to my house for the night'.[121]

Egil went home with him and Arinbjorn suggested that Egil should make a poem in Eirik's honour which could reconcile the problem. Arinbjorn told Egil that: "That's what my kinsman Bragi the Old did when he had to face the anger of King Bjorn of Sweden. He [Bragi] made a

[119] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 103; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 154.
[120] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 104; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 154-155.
[121] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 104; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 155.

*drápa* of twenty *stanzas* overnight and that's what saved his head. Maybe we'll be able to use the same method with the King and get you reconciled with him".[122] Egil would give it a try, but he never expected to make a praise-song about Eirik. However, his wife Gunnhild would do anything to ruin Egil's case. At midnight Arinbjorn asked Egil how his poem was coming along. Egil said that he had not composed a single line. During the night Egil eventually finished his poem and recited it.[123] The poem itself is very long, but a part of it showed that Egil tried to praise his enemy:

> And now I feed
> With an English king:
> So to English mead
> I'll word-mead bring,
> Your praise my task,
> My song your fame,
> If you but ask
> I'll sound your name.
>
> These praises, King,
> Won't cost you dear
> That I shall sing
> If you will hear:
> Who beat and blamed
> Your trail of red,
> Till Odin gazed
> Upon the dead.[124]

[122] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 104; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 156.
Svá gerði Bragi frændi þinn þá er hann varð fyrir reiði Bjarnar Svíakonungs, at hann orti *drápu* tvítuga um hann eina nótt ok þá þar fyrir hǫfuð sitt. Nú mætti vera at vér bærim gæfu til við konung svá at þér kœmi þat í frið við konung.
[123] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 104-105; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 155-156.
[124] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 112; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 158.
Vestr fórk of ver, en ek Viðris ber munstrandar mar, svá er mitt of far. Dró ek á flot við ísa brot; hlóð ek mærðar hlut míns knarrar skut.

Egil tried to bestow honour on Eirik. The difference with Athelstan is that Egil asked and also demanded Eiriks to give him praise "If you but ask I'll sound your name". King Eirik said that the poem was 'finely delivered'. Eirik told Arinbjorn he was so determined towards Egil that he was willing to risk his own head. For Arinbjorn's sake, Egil could leave York safely. But Eirik warned Egil that he or his sons should never see him again or get in Eirik or his men his way.[125] Egil made up the following verse:

> Ugly as I, Egil, am
> I'm not in the way
> Of refusing from a ruler
> My rock-helm of a head:
> Was there ever an enemy
> Won such an elegant
> Gift from a great-hearted
> Gallant like Eirik?[126]

This verse is more convincing than when Egil tried to honour King Eirik. Egil clearly said that Eirik is his enemy, but he gave him praise with "Was there ever an enemy Won such an elegant Gift from a great-hearted Gallant like Eirik?". After leaving England for the last time, Egil goes to Norway. At that time Æthelstan's foster-son, Hákon, was ruling Norway. When Egil met with Hákon he told him his business. Egil had a message from Æthelstan as a token of proof. Egil claimed, as his right, the property that had once belonged to Bjorn the Yeoman, both his estates and goods for Egil and his wife Asgerd. Egil argued that Æthelstan supported his claims. But Egil told that he had failed to get his rights because of King Eirik's power and Queen

Buðumk hilmir lǫð. Nú á ek hróðrar kvǫð, ber ek Óðins mjǫð á Engla bjǫð. Lofat vísa vann, víst mæri þann; hljóðs æsti ek hann, því at hróðr of fann.

[125] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 112; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 162.

[126] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 113; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 162-163.

Gunnhild's influence. Egil asked King Hákon to grant him his rights in this case.[127] Hákon said the following:

> 'I've been told, Egil,' said Hakon, ' that my brother Eirik and Queen Gunnhild are of one mind, and think you've overstepped the mark in your dealings with them. As I see it, Egil, you ought to be pleased if I steer clear of the matter, though as it happens Eirik and myself don't see eye to eye'.[128]

Egil responded:

> 'You can't keep silent about an important case like this, sir,' said Egil. 'Everyone in this land, native or foreign, has to obey your word. I've heard that you're making new laws in the country to secure everybody's rights, and I know you'll let me have mine along with everyone else. As I see it, I've both the family background and the goodwill here in Norway to hold my own against Atli the Short, but as to my disagreement with King Eirik I can tell you this, that I went to see him, and when we parted he told me I could go in peace wherever I liked. My lord, I want to offer you my service and support, and I know there are men here who are thought less warlike than me. I don't think much time will pass, assuming that you and Eirik live long enough, before you two meet again. I'd not be surprised if the time comes when you think Gunnhild has too many ambitious sons'.[129]

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[127] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 115; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 165-166.

[128] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 115; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 166.
Hákon konungr svarar: 'Svá hefi ek spurt at Eiríkr bróðir minn muni þat kalla, ok þau Gunnhildr bæði, at þú, Egill, munir hafa kastat steini um megn þér í yðrum skiptum; þætti mér þú vel mega yfir láta, Egill, at ek legða ekki til þessa máls, þó at vit Eiríkr bærim eigi gæfu til samþykkis.'

[129] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 115-116; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 166.
Egill mælti: 'Ekki máttu, konungr, þegja yfir svá stórum málum, því at allir menn hér í landi, innlenzkir ok útlenzkir, skulu hlýða yðru boði <ok banni>. Ek hefi spurt at þér setið lǫg hér í landi ok rétt hverjum manni. Nú veit ek at þér munuð mik láta þeim ná sem aðra menn; þikjumk ek hafa til þess burði ok frændastyrk hér í landi at hafa við Atla inn skamma. En um mál. Eiríks konungs er yðr flat at segja at ek var á hans fund ok skilðumsk vit svá at hann bað mik í friði fara hvert er ek vilda. Vil ek bjóða yðr, herra, mína fylgð ok þjónustu; veit ek at vera munu hér með yðr þeir menn er ekki munu þikja vígligri á velli at sjá en ek em. Er þat mitt hugboð at eigi líði langt áðr fundi ykra Eiríks konungs muni saman bera, ef ykr endisk aldr til; þiki mér þat undarligt ef eigi skal þar koma at þér þiki Gunnhildr eiga sona uppreist marga.

Hákon spoke once more:

> 'You'll never be a retainer of mine, Egil,' said the King. 'You and your kin have done too much harm to my family to be able to settle down in this country. If you go back to Iceland and stay on your father's farm, you'll not suffer harm at the hands of our kin. But here in Norway no matter how long you live, you'll have to put up with the fact that my family is the stronger. However, for the sake of my foster-father, King Athelstan, you'll be granted peace in this land and get your rights according to the law, for I know how fond of you he is'.[130]

Egil thanked Hákon for his permission and asked for tokens of proof to take to Thord of Aurland and the other land-holders of Sogn and Hordaland. King Hákon agreed to this. The interaction between Hakon and Egil provides us with a good understanding of Egil's character development and his relationship with other main characters. Although Hakon despises Egil over his bad and less honourable relationship with King Eirik, it is the last sentence that points out his good and honourable relationship with Athelstan ("However, for the sake of my foster-father, King Athelstan, you'll be granted peace in this land and get your rights according to the law, for I know how fond of you he is").[131]

In the honour-based culture of the Icelandic sagas, the world of gifts corresponded point for point with the universe of honour and blood. A simple assault or an insult had to be repaid. Miller argues that men who gave gifts were "men of honour". In the saga world the idiom of gifts, of repayment and requital, served also as the idiom of honour and feud. Insults and injuries were understood as gifts of negative moral value, but gifts nonetheless, and therefore demanded

[130] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 116; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 167.
Konungr segir: 'Ekki muntu, Egill, gerask mér handgenginn; miklu hafi þér frændr meira skarð hǫggit í ætt vára en þér muni duga at staðfestask hér í landi. Far þú til Íslands út ok ver þar at fǫðurarfi flínum; mun þér þá verða ekki mein at oss frændum, en hér í landi er fless ván um alla flína daga at várir frændr sé ríkastir. En fyrir sakir Aðalsteins konungs fóstra míns þá skaltu hafa hér frið í landi ok ná lǫgum ok landsrétti, því at ek veit at Aðalsteinn konungr hefir mikla elsku á þér.'
[131] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 116; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 167.

repayment. Not only the Kings' sagas but also *Egil's saga* exemplify this. Miller explains that the correspondences ran equally well in the other direction, as gifts could also be understood as insults. Gifts created an obligation, and this annoyed Egil.[132] This annoyance is shown when Egil reached an older age. On one day an old acquaintance named Einar went to Iceland to meet Egil once more to gift him a shield. However, Egil was away, and Einar waited three days, as it was a custom to stay no longer then three days on a visit. Before Einar left, he hung the shield above Egil's place and told the servants that the shield was a present for Egil.[133] When Egil returned home, he was not very happy: "Damn the man!' exclaimed Egil. 'Does he really expect me to stay up all night making up a poem about his shield? Get my horse, I'm going to ride after him and murder him".[134] In the end Egil and Einar remained friends, but the shield got damaged and was eventually thrown away. It may be possible that Egil only accepted a shield from a king, which Einar was not, and not from "some named man". It can be presumed that mythical skálds like Egil, did not seek positive (non agonistic) honour from non-royals.[135]

In *Egil's saga*, Egil may be considered a "giver of honour". He praised his friends and enemies with poems and verses. Like in *Knuýlinga* saga, Egil the skáld was a man of great influence. The main difference between the kings' sagas and this family saga is the fact that other characters react in a direct way to poems that Egil conducts for them. This gives a better understanding of how these poems were received by kings and if they needed an equal repayment. With Athelstan's gift of gold, jewellery and land, a form of gift-exchange still remains an important factor how a king received and repaid his honour. However, Eirik, his rival, gives Egil his freedom for the praise-poems he received in his honour. However, in the

[132] Miller, *Humiliation*, 16-17.
[133] See *Egil´s Saga*, ch. 78. Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 165; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 218; Miller, *Humiliation*, 15-16.
[134] See *Egil´s Saga*, ch. 78. Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 165; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 218.
Þá mælti Egill: 'Gefi hann allra manna armastr! Ætlar hann at ek skyla þar vaka yfir ok yrkja um skjǫld hans? Nú taki hest minn; skal ek ríða eptir honum ok drepa hann.'
[135] See *Egil´s Saga*, ch. 78. Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 165; Pálsson trans., *Egil's Saga*, 218.

saga Egil still mentions to Arinbjorn: “I’ll give it a try if you like’, said Egil, ‘but I never expected to make a praise-song for King Eirik”.[136] Besides kings, Egil also gives honour to other individuals of importance. A good example is at the funeral of his brother Thorolf when Egil spoke verses in honour of his brother. Despite Egil, the interactions between King Athelstan and King Ólafr of the Scots also provide an interesting insight. As King Athelstan wants to regain his honour, that he lost when his lands where conquered and raided by Ólafr, he tried to dishonour Olafr with his ways of negotiations. As evident with the episodes of repayment, Egil also accumulated honour from kings and therefore may also be considered a “receiver of honour”. *Egil’s saga* shows that the gift-exchange and one’s good-standing with his friends and enemies provides an interesting point to the portrayal of kings and their honour in *Egil’s saga*.

[136] Einarsson ed., *Egils Saga*, 116; Pálsson trans., *Egil’s Saga*, 156.
Egill segir: ‘Freista skal ek þessa ráðs er þú vill, en ekki hefi ek við því búizk at yrkja lof um Eirík konung.’

## *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*

The *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* is a short and simply told family saga and involves only a few characters. The Gunnlaugs saga follows the story of the traveling skáld named Gunnlaug Illugason. Gunnlaug travels widely and visits the royal court of England, Viking Dublin, and Sweden. Gunnlaug has two interactions in the saga with Anglo-Saxon King Æthelred II the Unready (r. 966-1016). Gunnlaug is a unique character: he is an Icelandic skáld and adventurer, often referred to in English as a warrior-poet. While there are some sources that claim Gunnlaug was a historical figure, the narrative for his life comes from the *Gunnlaugs saga* alone. The saga as a whole can be divided into four sections. The first is about Gunnlaug growing up in Iceland. The second is Gunnlaug's voyage to foreign courts to establish a reputation. The third is Gunnlaug's return to Iceland and the intrigues of regional and familial feuds. And the fourth is about Gunnlaug's voyaging from Iceland in pursuit of vengeance. What is most interesting is the portrayal of the English King Æthelred II and the English court. In relation to honour, Matthew Firth argues that Gunnlaug's poems are very different for each ruler he meets. Firth comments that Gunnlaug's poems provide "[…] an interesting insight into how to read the poetry Gunnlaug delivers at each court and, in turn, how the author intends for us to read the honour accorded each of the rulers".[137]

According to the saga, Gunnlaug is in London during the winter of 1002-3. His first visit with Æthelred goes as follows:

> Now at that time King Ethelred [Æthelred], the son of Edgar, ruled over England, and was a good lord; this winter he sat in London. But in those days there was the same tongue in England as in Norway and Denmark; thenceforward French went current there, for he was of French kin. Gunnlaug went presently to the king, and greeted him well and

[137] M. Firth,'Æthelred II 'the Unready' and the Role of Kingship in Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu', *The Court Historian* 25:1 (2020) 1-14, here 1-2.

> worthily. The king asked him from what land he came, and Gunnlaug told him all as it was. "But, said he, I have come to meet thee, lord, for that I have made a song on thee, and I would that it might please thee to hearken to that song." The king said it should be so, and Gunnlaug gave forth the song well and proudly; and this is the burden thereof: "As God are all folk fearing The free lord King of England, Kin of all king and all folk, To Ethelred the head bow". The king thanked him for the song and gave him as song-reward a scarlet cloak lined with the costliest of furs, and golden-broidered down to the hem; and made him his man; and Gunnlaug was with him all the winter, and was well accounted for.[138]

Like with Egil and Æthelstan, Æthelred rewards Gunnlaug with gifts as the skáld had bestowed him with honour. Gift-exchange, again, has an important part when it comes to the portrayal of kings and their honour. At this time of the saga the events of the St. Brice Day massacre (November 1002) had occurred. This event, ordered by Æthelred himself, saw the murder of all the Danes in England. Gunnlaug met the king at the same time these events coincided, the saga, does remain silent on these events. Æthelred was generous to Gunnlaug. When spring arrived, Gunnlaug asked Æthelred if he could leave England.[139] When the king asked why Gunnlaug wanted to leave, the latter sang a song. Æthelred replied:

> "So be it, then, skald," said the king, and withal he gave him a ring that weighed six ounces; "but," said he, "thou shalt give me thy word to come back next autumn, for I will not let thee go altogether, because of thy great prowess.[140]

In the years 1004-1006, Æthelred and Gunnlaug meet again: "King Ethelred welcomed Gunnlaug worthily, and that winter he was with the king, and was held in great honour". King

[138] *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu,* in E. Magnússon and W. Morris trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald* (Cambridge 1999) 1-35, here 13-14.
[139] Firth,'Æthelred II 'the Unready', 11; Magnússon trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald*, 15.
[140] Magnússon trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald*, 15.

Æthelred is portrayed as a good "Scandinavian" king. Which means that his portrayal in the saga is nothing specifically English. Firth argues: "The Icelandic experience of English kingship, both in the context of the saga's setting and its authorship, was negligible and thus, as a literary construct, Æthelred was manipulatable for an Icelandic audience".[141] This is mentioned in the passages above as Gunnlaugs again and again tries to defend or praise the honour of the king.[142]

Gunnlaug was also visiting a Norwegian earl named Eric. The following passage describes Gunnlaug's interaction with the dishonourable and weak Earl Eric:

> Gunlaug looked at him and sang:
>
> "A courtman there is
>
> Full evil I wis,
>
> A bad man and black,
>
> Belief let him lack"
>
> Then would Thorir seize an axe. The earl spake: "Let it be," says he; "to such things men should pay no heed. But now, Icelander, how old a man art thou?"
>
> Gunnlaug answers: "I am eighteen winters old as now," says he.
>
> Then says Earl Eric, "my spell is that thou shalt not live eighteen winters more."
>
> Gunnlaug said, somewhat under his breath: "Pray not against me, but for thyself rather." The earl asked thereat, "What didst thou say, Icelander?"
>
> Gunnlaug answers, "What I thought well befitting, that thou shouldst bid no prayers against me, but pray well for thyself rather".
>
> "What prayers, then?" says the earl.
>
> "That thou mightiest not meet thy death after the manner of Earl Hakon, thy father"
>
> The earl turned red as blood, and bade them take the rascal in haste; but Skuli stepped up to the earl, and said: "Do this for my words, lord, and give this man peace, so that he depart at swiftest."
>
> The earl answered, "At his swiftest let him be off then, if he will have peace, and never let him come again within my realm.[143]

[141] Firth,'Æthelred II 'the Unready', 13.
[142] Firth,'Æthelred II 'the Unready', 13; Magnússon trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald,* 21.
[143] Magnússon trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald,* 12-13.

Gunnlaug only uses praise-poems of people of the highest rank, such as a king. This is not unlike Egil, who will not craft a poem for Einar. The Norwegian earl receives no honour from Gunnlaug as it might be not worth it.

In another episode, Gunnlaug met King Olaf of Sweden (r. 995-1022). This episode provides a description of skálds rivalling to win a rulers affection, in this case involving Gunnlaug and another poet named Raven:

> Then the king [Olaf] called out: "Raven," says he, "what man is he in Iceland?"
>
> […]
>
> Now Gunnlaug and Raven fell a-talking together, and each told each of his travels. Raven said that he had gone the summer before from Iceland to Norway, and had come cast to Sweden in the forepart of winter. They soon got friendly together.
>
> But one day, when the Thing was over, they were both before the king, Gunnlaug and Raven.
>
> Then spake Gunnlaug, "Now, lord, I would that thou shouldst hear the song."
>
> "That I may do now," said the king.
>
> "My song too will I set forth now," says Raven.
>
> "Thou mayst do so," said the king.
>
> Then Gunnlaug said, "I will set forth mine first if thou wilt have it so, king".
>
> "Nay", said Raven, "it behoveth me to be first, lord, for I myself came first to thee."
>
> "Whereto came our fathers forth, so that my father was the little boat towed behind? Whereto, but nowhere?" says Gunnlaug. "And in likewise shall it be with us."
>
> Raven answered, "Let us be courteous enough not to make this a matter of bandying of words. Let the king rule here."
>
> The king said, "Let Gunnlaug set forth his song first, for he will not be at peace till he has his will."
>
> […]
>
> Soon after Raven became a man of King Olaf's, and asked him leave to go away. This the king granted him. And when Raven was ready to go, he spake to Gunnlaug, and said, "Now shall our friendship be ended, for that thou must needs shame me here before great man; but in time to come I shall cast on thee no less shame than thou hadst will to cast on me here."

> Gunnlaug answers: "Thy threats grieve me nought. Nowhere are we likely to come where I shall be thought less worthy than thou."
>
> King Olaf gave to Raven good gifts at parting, and thereafter he want away.[144]

This episode shows a rivalry between the two skálds that unfolds as they are before the king. At the end, Raven will accuse Gunnlaug that he had brought shame upon him, giving us a sense of the stakes. Both skálds wanted to win over Olaf's affection by honouring him with songs. Raven leaves Olaf's court as it might be possible that Gunnlaug's song was more favourable and therefore Gunnlaug had beaten him.

This chapter analysed how honour was portrayed by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the family sagas. This chapter analysed episodes in *Egil's saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, and a brief episode of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. Both *Egil's saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* have similar episodes on the function of honour. To summarize: both protagonists, Egil and Gunnalaug, who are skálds, go to different courts where they recite poems in honour of a ruler, most often a king. Egil also delivers military services to Athelstan and is a bit more flexible in his professions. Egil and Gunnlaug also give (dis)honour to their family and other ranks of rulers, like earls. Both skálds also accumulate honour for their descendants. The semi-mythical characters ground the honour if the family in the present of the sagas. In this analysis, this gift-exchange of honour is most frequent and important between Egil and King Athelstan, and Gunnlaug and King Æthelred II. Both Egil and Gunnlaug recited poems or delivered services to honour the king of their narratives and get rewarded equally for their doings. This is evident through many episodes and different poems we have discussed in this analysis. Engaging with previous parts of the analysis, it becomes more obvious that the kings in the family sagas are eager to equally repay Egil and Gunnlaug for their 'professions'. It is a good possibility that both kings were not only obligated to reward the skálds, but they were also in

[144] Magnússon trans., *Gunnlaug the Worm-Tongue and Raven the Skald*, 18-19.

debt and had to reward in order to not lose honour themselves. One can point out that the skálds are props for kings' sagas, and in the family sagas, past kings are props for past skálds and their contemporary families. It is doubtful that this symmetry has been seen before. There are many possible social formulae that can be drawn from both sagas. For *Egil's saga,* the most important ones are:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| Egil | Praise-poems / services | King Athelstan / King Eirik Bloodaxe / Thorolf |
| King Athelstan / King Eirik Bloodaxe | Rewards of valuables, Egil's freedom | Egil and his family / descendants |

And in *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| Gunnlaug and Raven (for King Olaf) | Praise-poems | King Æthelred II, King Olaf, Earl Eric (dishonour from Gunnlaug) |
| King Æthelred II, King Olaf, Earl Eric (dishonour for Gunnlaug) | Rewards of valuables | Gunnlaug and his family / descendants. Raven (from King Olaf) |

A brief episode from *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* features a choice in the form of compensation to honour one's counterpart. In this case, King Ælla of Northumbria, fearing Ivar the Boneless, gives him free choice of compensation for his father's death, Ragnar Lodbrok. The following social formulae can be made:

| **Giver of honour** | **The (im)material transaction** | **Receiver of honour** |
|---|---|---|
| King Ælla of Northumbria | A part of his land (could be considered as *wergild*) | Ivar (and partly King Ragnar) |
| Ivar | An oath of peace | King Ælla of Northumbria |

# Conclusion

In this master thesis, I tried to answer how honour played a role in the portrayal of the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the Icelandic sagas. To my understanding, aside from Matthew Firth, remarkably little research had been done to compare this subject with different genres of the sagas. In this thesis I have looked closely at the comparison between the kings' sagas (*konungassögur*) and the Icelandic sagas (*Íslendingasögur)*. For this analysis I used different sagas, in the forms of small passages to entire chapters. The secondary literature was used to support my argument and to mobilize some interesting concepts that previous historians had brought up. I used a social formula to make the actors of "giver of honour", the (im)material transaction, and the "receiver of honour" clearer. As there are many sagas, I chose a small selection where honour and kingship were best presented, or which showed an interesting case. Before an answer is given to this analysis, we shall first summarise the conclusion from each chapter.

The first chapter established the meaning of both concepts, "honour" and "kingship" in the Viking Age. Honour was at stake in virtually every social interaction in the Scandinavian world. Honour could be affected by the actions or inactions of others within a family. For instance, any assault upon the honour by a family female member, like unauthorised sexual approach of its female members. The saga of Ragnar Lodbrok (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*) shows that sexual approach can be bestowed with honour or dishonour. In a particular episode, Ragnar acts dishonourably towards his future wife Aslaug (Kraka). In other sagas like *Njál's saga*, honour did not play a central role for kings but rather for families. In some cases, there are exceptions; like the episode between Earl Hakon and Thrain. In the early Middle Ages, the 'warrior element of kingship" explains how kingship worked. It was traits like leadership, tactical ability, judgement, decisiveness, and a winning streak that inspired both trust and loyalty.

The second chapter analysed how honour was portrayed by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the kings' sagas. We looked at three different kings' sagas: *Fagrskinna*, *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*, and *The Knýtlinga saga*. I used an almost identical episode that was written in both the *Fagrskinna* and *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri*. This episode features a gift-exchange between King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway (also known as Hákon IV or Hákon the Old, 1204-1263) and King Athelstan of England (r. 924-939). In this episode both kings gave each other a gift. The gift could be seen as a mockery and aimed to dishonour and lower the status of the other king. However, this was not always the case: *The saga of Haraldr hárfagri* gives one the idea that not all gifts were insults. A gift has the power to annoy as well as to please, the capacity of challenge as well as to comfort. With both sagas, "the giver of honour" is portrayed by both kings. In *The Knýtlinga saga* it clearly are the skálds who wield this "giver-role". *The Knýtlinga saga* features the life of Knut the Great of Denmark and England (r. 1014, 1016-1035). In the England episode, there are three skálds, Thord Kolbeinsson, Ottar the Black and Sigvat, who tell of the events in detail. At almost every possible moment, the skálds try to honour their king (which can be seen as a form of propaganda). It was the good standing of one's friend and enemy what made the kings in the kings' sagas (dis)honourable.

The third chapter explained how honour was portrayed by Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings in the family sagas. We looked at two very well-known sagas: *Egil's saga* and *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*. In *Egil's* saga, honour is central to the main protagonist, the warrior and the skáld Egil. It is he who bestows kings with honour, as he recites poems in their presence. But for his military service to the Anglo-Saxon King Athelstan, Egil also gets equally rewarded as his service embodies the concept of gift-exchange: Egil gives his service or recites poems in honour of the king and gets equally rewarded in his honour. On some occasions Egil also recites poems in honour of other protagonists and even antagonist such as his brother Thorolf, and King Eirik Bloodaxe of Norway and Northumbria, and his wife Gunnhild. In

*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, a similar theme is seen with the protagonist Gunnlaug. In this saga, the court scenes are more important than in *Egil's saga*. Gunnlaug, who is also a skáld, travels to different European courts where he recites poems to honour the ruler. The most important ruler is King Æthelred II the Unready of England (r. 966-1016). Gunnlaug meets twice with the king and recites poems in his honour. Towards rulers of lesser status than a king, Gunnlaug is actually dishonourable, as is the case with the Norwegian Earl Eric. Another episode at the court of King Olafr of Sweden (r. 995-1022) features a rivalry between Gunnlaug and another skáld named Raven. As with the kings' sagas, we see a similar contrast with the portrayal of kings in the family sagas. It is both the friends and enemies which bestowed a king with honour. In both genres gift-exchange is an important concept in the world of honour. However, it are mainly the protagonists, the kings, and impartially skálds in the family sagas who act as "givers of honour" while in the kings' sagas, these "givers" are of less importance to the narrative or not as clearly mentioned.

After a thorough analysis, I can conclude that while looking at honour, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian kings were portrayed by other characters or "givers of honour" with the help of gift-exchange. Gift-exchange played an important role in almost every episode in this analysis, besides those containing a feud, where it was the victor who won honour. It was never a king who bestowed himself with honour, there was always someone, in this case minor characters or protagonists, who had the ability of "givers of honour". In most cases, gift-exchange was an (im)material transaction-tool used to receive or to give honour. While with feuding, it was always the victor who won honour, the episodes that were used in this analysis show only a few examples of feuding. In this case, it was rather the negotiations or court-episodes in which honour was bestowed, in a less obvious manner, as with a feud between two rival parties. While the kings' sagas and family sagas have a slightly different meaning to the "giver of honour", in both sub-genres there was always some form of gift-exchange that allowed

a king to give or receive honour. Furthermore, both sub-genres provide evidence that honour could be bestowed to both the friends and the enemies of the "giver". However, one can point out that the skálds are props for kings' sagas, and in the family sagas, past kings are props for past skálds and their contemporary families.

For further research, more sagas can be used for an analysis. There are many more episodes that contain some interesting ideas on this subject. It is possible that other sub-genres of the sagas, which are not mentioned in this analysis, feature some interesting episodes of honour and kingship. At a first look the concepts of "honour" and "kingship" in the Icelandic sagas seem very obvious; but if one would look more closely, there is an extensive meaning in which the authors represent in their narratives.

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Figure on frontpage: Gunnlaugr ormstunga before Eiríkr Hákonarson, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunnlaugr_ormstunga.