

What is “honor”?

Men, Women, and Honor in the Sagas of Icelanders

~ or ~

Why Viking Penis Honor is for Losers

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Part 1: An in-depth look at honor in some sagas

A Matter of Honor

Ketill spoke with Þorsteinn, his son: [...] “When I was young, then men desired to do some great deeds, either to go out raiding, or else to win wealth and **honor** through exploits that had a certain amount of deadly risk involved in them.”¹

– *Vatsdæla saga*, Ch. 2

*Ketill mælti við Þorstein, son sinn: [...] ‘Þá er ek var ungr, þá girntusk menn á nokkur framaverk, annattveggja at ráðask í hernað eða afla fjár ok **sóma** með einhverjum atferðum, þeim er nokkur mannhætta var í’.*

¹All translations in this presentation are by the speaker.

Violence and Manhood

Then it also came into Þorsteinn's mind that his father said he was no better with a weapon than a daughter or other woman, and there would be more honor for his kinsmen if there were a breach in their family line than if he were part of it.

– *Vatsdæla saga*, Ch. 3

Þá kom honum ok í hug, at faðir hans segði hann eigi betra til vápnis en dóttur eða aðra konu ok meiri sæmð væri frændum, at skarð væri í ætt þeira en þar sem hann var.

hvatr and *blauðr*

- *Blauðr*: “feminine”; as “a term of abuse [...] coward[ly]”
- *Hvatr*: I. “bold, active, vigorous”; II. “male”

– Cleasby and Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*

Accusations of being *blauðr* are “insults preoccupied with power—or, more to the point, with powerlessness under threat of physical force.”

– Carol Clover, “Regardless of Sex”

hóf: a new ideal

“Leaders gained prestige and standing by publicly playing the role of men of moderation (*hófsmenn*) and goodwill (*góðviljamenn*).”

“Success in maintaining reciprocal agreements and playing the role of advocate required conformity to a standard of moderation, termed *hóf*. An individual who observed this standard was called a *hófsmaðr*, a person of justice and temperance.”

– Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*

Iceland: *hvatr* or *hófliga*?

“Iceland’s overseas Norse community was culturally split between the military values of the mother country and the more peaceful realities of the new land.”

– Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*

Question

- Which route to honor—being *hvert* or being *hófliga*—is represented in the Sagas of Icelanders as being more successful?

Approach

- Who is more honored in old age?

Landnámabók

“And these settlers were the most honored”¹; the list includes:

- **Ingimundr** gamli
- Skalla-Grímr
- **Auðr** djúpauðga

“When the land had been inhabited for six decades, these were the greatest chieftains in the country”²; the list includes:

- **Egill** Skalla-Grímsson

¹ *En þessir landnámsmenn hafa gofgastir verit* (S 399, H 356)

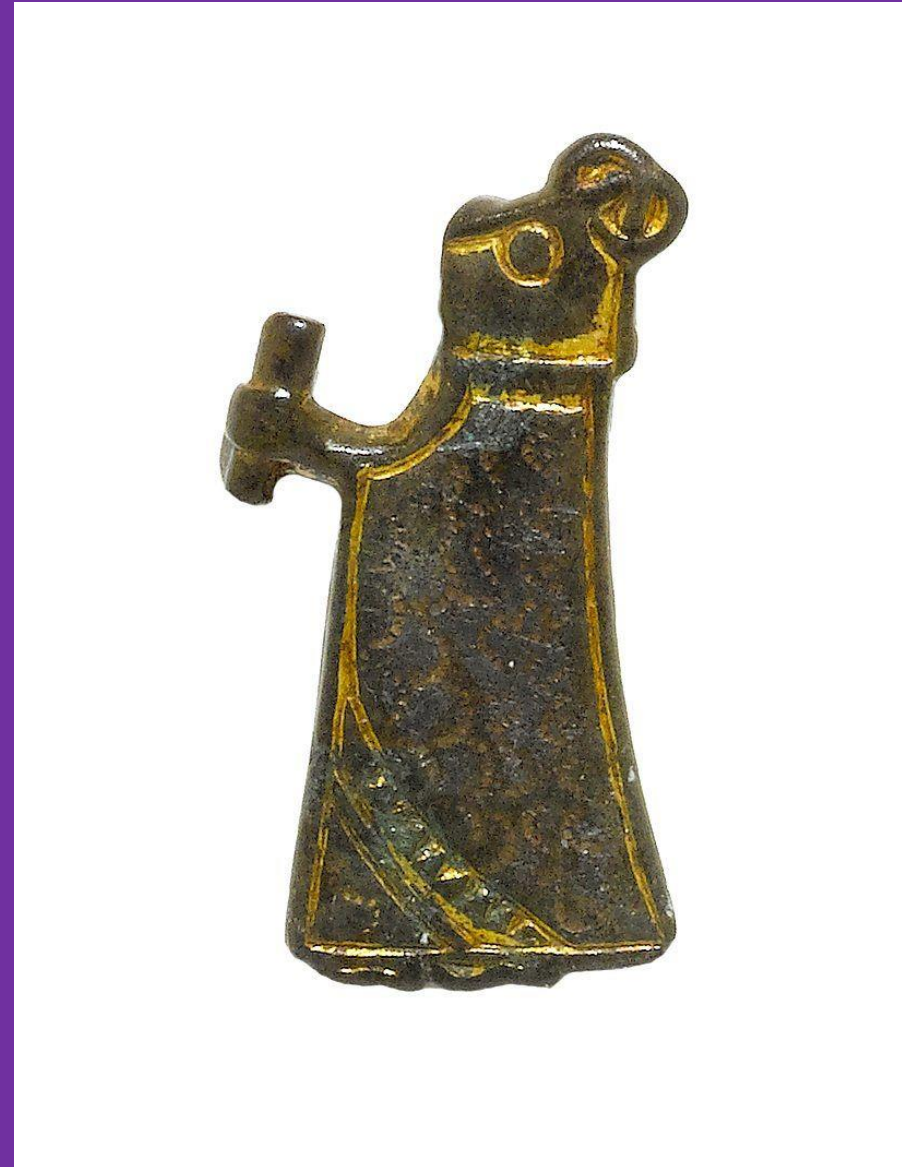
² *Þá er landit hafði sex tigu vetra byggt verit, váru þessir höfðingjar mestir á landinu* (S 398, H 355)

Auðr/Unnr
djúp(a)úðga:

All hófliga and no hvatr

Sources:

- *Landnámabók*
- *Eyrbyggja saga*
- *Laxdæla saga*



Ingimundr the Old:

Both *hvatr* and *hófliga*

Sources:

- *Landnámabók*
- *Vatnsdæla saga*



Ingimundr's *hóf*

He was agreeable toward most people and not combative. There was a fine selection of people all around the neighborhood, but he was the most honored among them, and this was owing to his benevolence, generosity and wisdom.

– *Vatnsdæla saga*, Ch. 17

Hann varð samhuga við flesta ok óágangsamr. Gott var þá mannval víða þar nálægt, þótt hann væri með mestri virðingu, ok helt til þess góðgirnd hans, stórlæti ok vitsmunir.



Egill Skallagrímsson:

All hvatr and no hófliga

Sources:

- *Landnámabók*
- *Egils saga*

Egill and his son

Þorsteinn was a wise man, peaceable, calm, and the most moderate of men. Egill had little love for him; Þorsteinn likewise did not feel much affection toward him.

– *Egils saga*, Ch. 79

Þorsteinn var vitr maðr ok kyrrlátr, hógværr, stilltr manna beztr; Egill unni honum lítit; Þorsteinn var ok ekki við hann ástúðigr.

Egill and his neighbor

Qnundr: “People will say, Egill, that such a decision as you have made and proclaimed is rather unjust.”

Egill: “I thought, Qnundr, that you would know that I have held my ground against such people as you and your son.”

– *Egils saga*, Ch. 82

Qnundr: “Þat mun mál manna, Egill, at gørð sjá, er þú hefir gørt ok upp sagt, sé heldr skqkk.”

Egill: “Hugða ek, Qnundr, at þú myndir þat vita, at ek hefi haldit hlut mínum fyrir þvílíkum svá mōnnum, sem þit eruð feðgar.”

“Old Age” in Norse Society

“Age was defined according to its function [...] Mature individuals became ‘old’ when they could no longer fulfil the tasks society required of them [...] Getting ‘old’ was equivalent to being unable to work or carry out adult responsibilities.”

– Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, “Becoming ‘Old’”

Auởr/Unnr:

- Loses vigor and health
- Maintains authority
- Respected counsellor
- Deferred to by grandson
- Dies upright
- Honored at funeral



Ingimundr :

- Goes blind
- Gives up running estate
- Remains at home
- Has dedicated servant
- Death:
 - Shows courage and stoicism
 - Dies upright in high-seat
- Honored at funeral





Egill:

- Goes blind and deaf
- Becomes stiff
- Lives with step-daughter
- Mocked by servants
- ‘Managed’ by family
- Is vindictive in return
- Funeral *pro forma*

- Auðr: “It seemed very praiseworthy to people, how [she] had kept her stature to her dying day.” (*Laxdæla saga*, Ch. 7)

Þótti mönnum mikils um vert, hversu Unnr hafði haldit virðingu sinni til dauðadags

- Ingimundr: “This [Ingimundr’s death] was now widely reported, and it seemed—as was the case—great and terrible news.” (*Vatnsdæla saga*, Ch. 23)

Þetta spurðisk nú víða ok þótti, sem var, mikil tíðendi ok ill

- Egill: <crickets>

Part 2: “Honor” in Heathenism today

What is “honor”?

	values from :	Taught through:	Judged by:	Consequences:
Medieval Heathenism	culture	stories, examples	peers / culture	shame / outlawry

George Fenwick Jones, *Honor in German Literature*:

“The word *êre* [‘honor’] usually designated the recognition, respect, reverence, or reputation which a person enjoyed among men, or else physical tokens thereof [...] it denoted not what a man had in him, but only what other people thought of him” – p. 6

“Shame” is “defined as the extreme discomfit or fear of being thought guilty, inadequate, or inferior by one’s peers [...] The worst shame that can befall [...] is to be ridiculed by his peers” – pp. 31–32

	Values from:	Taught through:	Judged by:	Consequences:
Medieval Heathenism	culture	stories, examples	peers / culture	shame / outlawry
Medieval Catholicism	God via Church	priests, preaching	God (internal) Church (external)	punishment / penance
Protestantism	God via Bible	preaching, reading	God, self	damnation / guilt
Enlightenment	reason	education	self	guilt
Post-Modernism	multiple	multiple	multiple	inconsistent
Modern Heathens	?	?	?	?

What does “honor” mean
to us?