

Horses as Status Symbols: Medieval Icelandic horses as symbols of masculine honor in a one-sexed world

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I. Introduction

Horses, the unsung heroes of the Viking age, have been overlooked all too often in the study of medieval Iceland and its culture. Although many historians attribute the horse's influence in medieval Iceland to their practical value as pack animals and efficient means of transportation, it seems that horses held symbolic value as well. From the evidence available in Icelandic family sagas and archaeological finds, it is obvious that medieval Icelanders, most often the men, but sometimes the women too, were intimately associated with their horses. As evidenced in *Hrafinkel's Saga* and *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, it seems that although those who owned horses tended to be wealthy, powerful, and/or renowned, there are also a few examples of men of lesser status both riding horses and engaging in horse fights. In medieval Iceland, the horses of the rich and powerful were outward expressions of masculine honor, providing mounts of prestige while simultaneously serving practical roles.¹ Members of the lower class sometimes owned and rode horses as well, but they did so in an attempt to mimic the masculine honor exhibited by the upper classes atop their steeds. Many times members of the lower class were unsuccessful in their mimicry of honorable prestige. Their horses, serving practical functions, were mere tools, devoid of honorable symbolism. Rather than being seen as honorable for their ability to own and ride horses, these members of the lower class were equated with their horses and often viewed as beasts themselves. Thus, much of the symbolic value of the horse was in its owner's ability to ride above the animal, both literally and figuratively, as a master and owner who has conquered and quelled a potential beast.

¹ This argument is in part derived from Clifford Geertz's discussion of the Balinese Cockfight.

II. Evidence

The evidence available is, as usual in medieval studies, rather limited. For my study, I am relying heavily on three Icelandic family sagas—*Hrafnkel's Saga*, *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, and *The Story of Thorstein Staff-Struck*. Although these sagas are by no means a reflection of the comprehensive body of Icelandic sagas (the full collection contains over 40 tales), they serve as a representative sample of the type of interaction Icelanders had with their horses. The use of sagas as historical evidence has been and remains controversial among medieval Icelandic scholars. Several 20th century scholars of the book-prose theory (such as Sigurður Nordal) believe that sagas are purely literary creations of the 13th century. As such, although the sagas may take basic names and locations from *Landnámabok*, scholars of the book-prose theory argue that the remaining details of sagas are fabricated by their 13th century authors.² From the stance of a scholar of the book-prose theory, the sagas offer very little information of historical value in reference to the 10th century; they are instead literary reflections of Christian Iceland in the 13th century.

Recently, however, more modern scholars have attempted to disprove the book-prose theory. For example, writing specifically about *Hrafnkels Saga*, Henry Kratz argues that it is unlikely that a 13th century author would be concerned enough with accuracy to consult *Landnámabok* for accurate places and names but careless enough to distort facts about genealogy and life history at will.³ Kratz suggests that a poem or other written source might have been the origin of *Hrafnkels Saga*, and although many facts may have been distorted due to oral transmission of the saga over so many generations, the cultural

² *Landnámabok*, often referred to as “The Book of the Settlements”, is a manuscript describing in detail the settlement of 9th and 10th century Iceland by the Norse.

³ Kratz, Henry. "Hrafnkels Saga: Thirteenth-Century Fiction?" *Scandinavian Studies* 53 (1981). P 425.

backdrop of the saga likely has much basis in 10th century reality. Although the facts are mixed up with 13th century authorial fabrications, Kratz argues that “the events depicted are...more in accord with real-life happenings than with an invented, fictional plot.”⁴

Additionally, Jesse Byock, a prominent scholar of medieval Iceland, believes that sagas contain inherently valuable information otherwise not available or accessible.⁵ (Since I rely so heavily on family sagas as evidence, it is obvious that I have sided with Byock and Kratz, rather than Nordal and the book-prose scholars.) Although sagas contain a plethora of improbable events, Byock suggests that the cultural backdrop of the sagas is likely very similar to that of 10th century Iceland; therefore, when understood in collaboration with archeological, anthropological, and other historical evidence, sagas can serve as reliable sources.⁶

That said, however frequently this caveat has been reiterated, it is also important to remember that all three sagas were written in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, well after the events themselves occurred.⁷ It would be bad history to understand each event literally, since there are undoubtedly later literary conventions which influenced which events made it into the written story and which were eliminated and forever hidden in the past. Although additional evidence is scanty, I have attempted to follow Byock’s advice and have found archeological evidence to support my claims. Although I primarily derive my argument from the sagas themselves, evidence from grave finds and archaeological digs serves to solidify the argument in tangible reality.

⁴ Kratz, Henry, "Hrafnkels Saga: Thirteenth-Century Fiction?" *Scandinavian Studies* 53 (1981). P. 444.

⁵ *Viking Age Iceland*. Pp 149-51.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Scudder, Bernard, trans. *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Ed. Örnólfur Thorsson. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, 2005. P ix.

III. Honorable Men and Women atop Their Horses

Owning and riding horses in Icelandic culture was an expression of male honor, but men were not the only members of society capable of achieving such honor. Carol Clover suggests that Iceland was a one-sex system, one that recognized men as superior and recognized women simply as inferior men.⁸ In such a system, the barrier between masculine honor and feminine weakness was highly permeable and open to members of either sex. Not only was it possible for men to slip into the realm of the feminine (especially through old age and weakness of character) but it was also possible for women, through strength of character and favorable political circumstances, to enter the realm of masculine honor. This presented a sort of “double jeopardy for the Norse man” since masculinity was “not only losable by men, but achievable by women.”⁹ Here it is important to keep in mind the type of honor for which Icelanders strove. While wealth and brute strength remained marginally important, Icelanders considered those who were brave, honest, fearless, and faithful to have achieved a status worthy of masculine honor.¹⁰ Under this one-sex model, honorable men (and sometimes women) were the only members of society worthy of “masculinity” and thus, masculine honor and social status—these are the men and women who rode horses.

The Saga of Grettir the Strong, Hrafnkel's Saga, and The Story of Thorstein Staff-Struck abound with scenarios involving horses. The connection between Icelanders and their horses is immediately apparent and more often than not, it is the powerful, rich, and (by definition) prominent characters who ride about mounted atop their horses. The

⁸ Clover, Carol J. "Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe." *Representations* 44 (1993). P 13.

⁹ Clover, Carol J. P 14.

¹⁰ Karlsson, Gunnar. *History of Iceland*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. P 57.

authors of both *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* and *Hrafnkel's Saga* often mention the elevated status of an individual and within the same paragraph (or at least the same discussion) the author also reveals that said character either owns a fine horse or is riding one somewhere. For example, Thorir is introduced as “a powerful figure in his district” and then in the same paragraph, after putting an outlaw’s price on Grettir’s head, Thorir rides home.¹¹ It is significant also that this paragraph describes an incident at the Althing, since all respectable men rode horses there.¹²

Later in the saga, Thorbjorg, the wife of the farmer from Vatnsfjord, is sighted riding in brightly colored clothes. After she is identified by the men who are currently torturing Grettir for his misdeeds, she is introduced as “a woman of firm character and foresight” who “took charge of local affairs and decided everything when Vermund [her husband] was away from home.”¹³ She later proves to be of significant influence among Grettir’s torturers and successfully frees Grettir from capture. Although Thorbjorg is a woman, it seems she is nonetheless deserving of masculine honor within the one-sex model of gender due to her “firm character” and influence in the district. Therefore, she rides atop a horse.

One last example of direct connection between horses and a character’s status is evidenced in *Hrafnkel's Saga*. Hrafnkel is introduced as the goði of Adalbol.¹⁴ He is said to be “kind and considerate to his own men, but harsh and ruthless to his enemies.”¹⁵

¹¹ Scudder, Bernard, trans. *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Ed. Örnólfur Thorsson. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, 2005. P 103.

¹² Solheim, Svale. *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*. Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1956. P 19.

¹³ *Saga of Grettir the Strong*. P 119.

¹⁴ A goði is a priest or chieftain.

¹⁵ Palsson, Hermann, trans. *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories*. New York: Penguin Group (USA) Incorporated, 1971. P 37.

Hrafinkel's most "treasured possession" is a horse named Freyfaxi.¹⁶ The relationship between this horse, Hrafinkel, and the power struggle within the saga is significant and will be discussed further below. However, at present, what is important is the immediate relationship between a man of power and his possession of a horse.

These three examples show an immediate link between Icelanders deserving of masculine honor and their horses. Although the connection between honorable Icelanders and their horses is obvious, ownership of a horse does not seem to have been a precondition to holding a position of prominence, merely an available perquisite. Toward the end of *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, Spes, a "noble lady" who is "very rich and of a good family" is consistently depicted on foot.¹⁷ In fact, even when she travels to give an oath along a wet and uneven path, she walks.¹⁸ It is highly possible that Spes's desire to retain her ladylike status might explain her consistent appearances on foot rather than mounted atop a horse. If Spes was considered worthy of riding a horse, it would also mean transcendence into masculinity, and this is perhaps something Spes sought to avoid deliberately. Perhaps it was advantageous for her to remain womanly. Of course, it is also possible that Spes owned horses, but they are not mentioned. Thus, although the link between prominence and horses is obvious in some circumstances, it is not obvious in all.

IV. Fine Clothes, Fine Gifts, and Fine Horses

Beyond the simple relationship between honorable Icelanders and their horses, in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* we see a pronounced relationship between horses and fine clothes and gifts. Horses and horse equipment are often given as gifts along with fine

¹⁶ Hrafinkel's Saga. P 38.

¹⁷ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P. 195.

¹⁸ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 203.

garments, and saga characters are described wearing fine garments while riding good horses for important events. For example, upon parting after spending considerable time together “Thorfinn gave him [Grettir] many fine garments and a painted saddle and a bridle. They parted in friendship.”¹⁹ Later, when Grettir wants to humiliate a childhood rival (Audun), he uses the garments and horse equipment to his advantage. “Grettir dressed extravagantly and rode off in the finely wrought painted saddle that Thorfinn had given him. He had a good horse and took his finest weapons with him.”²⁰ The extravagant garments, the good horse, and the painted saddle signal Grettir’s status to Audun just as an Armani suit and Porsche might represent and display a man’s status today. Grettir proceeds to prove that he is stronger than Audun. Grettir and Audun’s fight is broken up by Bardi, who, coincidentally, arrives “smartly dressed” and riding a horse.²¹

Later again, after a considerably long stay with Thorhall (and a successful elimination of a pesky demon), Grettir is rewarded with these same fine gifts. He is given a “good horse and splendid clothes.”²² These gifts are considered worthy compensation for Grettir’s riddance of Glam (the demon), and thus must be of considerable value. Giving the gift of a horse is on par with the gift of fine clothing, and fine clothing has been described as a “high-status item,” especially when imported.²³ It is reasonable then to consider horses and horse equipment as high-status gifts as well, especially since they were usually only given on special occasions to good friends.

¹⁹ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 61.

²⁰ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 66.

²¹ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 67.

²² Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 86.

²³ Viking Age Iceland. P 67.

V. Horses in Grave Finds

Certain grave finds from pagan Iceland also exhibit a link between wealth, prestige, and horses. In a particularly illuminating study *Diversity in Viking Age Horse Burial: A comparative study of Norway, Iceland, Scotland, and Ireland*, Maeve Sikora works off the premise that “burial data are meaningfully constituted and can be used to investigate socio-cultural variation.”²⁴ Horse burial is the “deliberate slaughter” of one or several horses to be placed in a grave. Sikora suggests that horse burial was an expression of social status “just as for boat burial and elaborate grave goods.”²⁵ It may have even been an act of conspicuous consumption and display, since horses were probably expensive and coveted possessions.²⁶

Of the 316 known pagan graves from Iceland, 113 of them contained horses, which is an astonishing 36%.²⁷ The ritual was probably introduced by Norwegian settlers, but the practice came to be more common in Iceland than it ever was in Norway (where a mere 7% of pagan graves contained horse burials). If horse burial represented a sort of conspicuous consumption, Sikora suggests that Iceland’s non-hierarchical society made it possible for a large proportion of the population to be buried prominently. The inclusion of a horse in one’s grave distinguishes a man or woman from those not worthy of a horse, and thus displays his or her social status. The horse burials often contained other goods, by which it has been possible to determine the gender of the deceased. “At least forty graves are male interments but eighteen are female, while in two cases, horses were

²⁴ Sikora, Maeve. "Diversity in Viking Age Horse Burial: A comparative study of Norway, Iceland, Scotland, and Ireland." *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 12/13 (2003). P 87.

²⁵ Sikora, Maeve. P 88.

²⁶ For more on conspicuous consumption, see Thorstein Veblen.

²⁷ Sikora, Maeve. P 91.

found in double graves of a male and female.”²⁸ Although it was more common for men to be interred with their horses, it was not uncommon for women to be buried alongside their equestrian partners. Since horses were so closely associated with masculine honor, it seems fitting that men would want to be buried with their horses. Similarly, women who had attained such honor would have wanted to be buried along with their horses, since the animals were tangible status symbols exhibiting a woman’s prominence in a male-dominated society.

In addition to the grave finds in Sikora’s study, another example of horse remains found in *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*. Grettir goes inside a mound which is said to contain a treasure hoard. The first thing he encounters is “some horse bones,” then the remains of a deceased man who was next to a huge pile of gold and silver.²⁹ Once again it seems that horses were considered important enough to be buried along with their owners, and sometimes, horse burial was part of conspicuous consumption.

VI. The Story of Freyfaxi: Symbolic Transcendence

If ever there was a horse in medieval Iceland which represented prominence and the transfer of power, it is Freyfaxi, the “treasured possession” of Hrafinkel, the prominent goði of Adalbol. Freyfaxi was a “pale-dun stallion” dedicated to Frey, a god associated with fertility in Norse mythology. Hrafinkel “loved this horse so passionately that he swore a solemn oath to kill anyone who rode the stallion without his permission.”³⁰ Einar, an acquaintance of Hrafinkel, becomes Hrafinkel’s shepherd but is warned never to ride the stallion. Hrafinkel tells Einar that he may ride any of the “ten or twelve other horses”

²⁸ Sikora, Maeve. P 93.

²⁹ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 39.

³⁰ Hrafinkel’s Saga. P 38.

owned by Hrafinkel.³¹ This not only indicates that Hrafinkel is wealthy or prestigious enough to own at least eleven horses, but it also signifies that certain horses are more emotionally valuable than others. His preference for Freyfaxi and his lack of concern for the other mares is a result of Hrafinkel's emotional (might we say symbolic?) attachment to his stallion, which is a high-quality horse. The horse is thus representative of Hrafinkel's own standing in society while the mares are merely additional farmhands.

It is also likely that Freyfaxi held religious value, considering he is dedicated to the Norse god Frey. This dedication was not infrequent among *goði* subsisting on agriculture, and the connections between horses and Frey are myriad in Norse culture. Horse sacrifice, horse fights, the consumption of horse flesh, and the slaughter of horse funerals have been linked to fertility cults.³² As a stallion dedicated to the god of fertility, Freyfaxi symbolizes the fecundity of Hrafinkel's land and the virility of Hrafinkel himself. Thus, not only is Hrafinkel's connection with his stallion emotional, but it is religious as well.

Tragically, Einar succumbs to temptation and rides Freyfaxi. The stallion allows Einar to complete his shepherding tasks more quickly and efficiently, "traveling fast and far, for this was an outstanding horse."³³ Freyfaxi is "running with sweat...covered in mud and panting with exhaustion" after the ride.³⁴ After dismounting, Freyfaxi runs home to Hrafinkel, who realizes that Einar has ridden the forbidden horse. Hrafinkel speaks to Freyfaxi as though he were a human, asking "what could the champion want?" "It grieves me to see how you have been treated, my fosterling. You had your wits about when you

³¹ Hrafinkel's Saga. P 40.

³² Ellis Davidson in Sikora, Maeve. P 87.

³³ Hrafinkel's Saga. P 41.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

came to me, and this shall be avenged. Go back to your herd.” Freyfaxi seems to understand and leaves immediately.³⁵ All of this obviously requires a bit of literary license, because it seems unlikely that a horse would respond so well to Hrafinkel, but nonetheless the way in which Hrafinkel speaks to his horse is important. There is obviously a bond Hrafinkel feels with the stallion, whether or not Freyfaxi reciprocated that feeling in reality. This horse-man bond is an important aspect of Icelandic society, especially as evidenced in this (and other) saga(s).

Of course, Einar is quickly killed, and in typical Icelandic fashion, his family seeks revenge. Although Hrafinkel has never lost a trial, Sam, the kinsman of Einar, seeks compensation for Einar’s death. In an unprecedented scenario, Sam wins the case and Hrafinkel is sentenced to full outlawry.³⁶ Sam and his kinsman Thorgeir take over Hrafinkel’s farm and possessions at Adalbol, and a special mention is made regarding Hrafinkel’s horses. While Thorgeir decides to keep the mares since they “could be of some help on the farm,” he decides to get rid of Freyfaxi. He rationalizes that “the stallion doesn’t seem better than any other horse, rather worse in fact, since he’s been the cause of so much trouble.”³⁷ Although the stallion is in fine health and could easily be as useful as the mares, he is ceremoniously murdered by being pushed over a cliff.³⁸ Thus ends Freyfaxi and symbolically, thus ends Hrafinkel’s power and rein. (To Sam and Thorgeir’s dismay, however, Hrafinkel regains power and subjugates them a short time later.)

³⁵ Hrafinkel’s Saga. P 42.

³⁶ Hrafinkel’s Saga. P 55.

³⁷ Hrafinkel’s Saga. P 60.

³⁸ Hrafinkel’s Saga. P 61.

The story of Freyfaxi is the story of a horse holding a symbolic status beyond his practical purposes. He represented Hrafnkel's stronghold of power in Adalbol both in his superior quality and his place of prominence in Hrafnkel's heart. To rid of the horse was to rid of Hrafnkel's power and symbolically to do away with Hrafnkel's masculine honor.

VII. Equating the Lower Class with Horses

Men of lower class rode horses too, but in doing so, they were merely imitating the upper class. Often, members of the lower class (dishonorable men especially) were equated with their animals. In *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, Gisli, a man of false bravado, waits patiently for Grettir with several comrades. They are dressed in bright, fancy garments and mounted atop horses waiting to murder Grettir (since the price on his head is six marks of silver). When Grettir arrives, Gisli's false bravado becomes obvious, since he hides behind his companions while they fight Grettir. Grettir murders one of Gisli's companions, and after exchanging several blows with Grettir, Gisli drops his weapons and runs away, leaving his horse behind.³⁹ Grettir composes a verse about Gisli:

The horse that nibbles with its teeth
lightly when it ought to bite
saves its breath until the end
then runs off from the other horse.
From me that day at Myrar
ran interfering Gisli
farting like a carhorse,
stripped of fame and honor.⁴⁰

³⁹ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 136.

⁴⁰ Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 137.

The coward does not deserve to ride a horse but rather becomes the beast himself, running away on foot, “farting like a carthorse stripped of fame and honor.”

A second example in which men of lower class symbolically become equated with their horses is evidenced in the horse fight. Originating in Norway, the horse fight came to Iceland as a form of both entertainment and confrontation between rivals. *The Saga of Grettir the Strong* and *The Story of Thorstein Staff-Struck* contain typical examples of Icelandic horse fighting. In these stories, a mare is tied near the fighting grounds to excite the stallions into competition. Each man holds a goad with which he instigates his stallion into fighting. Once the fight begins, it is a virtual free for all. As horses become increasingly aggressive, so too do the men involved. They goad their horses into more intense fighting.⁴¹ As the fight escalates, the men themselves sometimes become personally involved in the fight. In fear of losing the battle, they resorted to physical blows against each other and each others’ horses. The goad no longer serves as a mere prodding instrument for one’s horse, but becomes a weapon to be used against one’s opponent and his horse.

The Story of Thorstein Staff-Struck is one in which the horse fight is a central moment. Thord, a haughty caretaker of a rich man’s horses, and Thorstein, the son of a has-been Viking and a renowned horse-breeder, schedule a horse fight between their two stallions. It is important to note that neither man is particularly deserving of masculine honor. When Thord’s horse begins to lose the fight, Thord strikes Thorstein’s horse in order to injure it. Thorstein evens the score by hitting Thord’s horse. In retaliation, Thord

⁴¹ The Saga of Grettir the Strong. P 69.

hits Thorstein on the head with his horse-goad.⁴² In this example, we see the men fighting like their horses, acting no better than beasts.

The movement from horse fight, a symbolic face off between two men, to physical brawl indicates the fluidity and intimacy with which the horse could be directly equated to the owner. In Iceland, winning physical fights in the public arena was a source of honor.⁴³ Whether the fight was held for the general public at a festival or was a quiet duel between rivals, the victor gained respect not only from the loser but from society as well. In light of the current argument, it is particularly illuminating that both Thorstein and Thord either possess a fighting stallion of their own or acquire one through powerful allies despite their lower class status. Ownership of or access to a good fighting stallion indicates that these men had personal connections to men of honor, and therefore had an example of honor to which they could aspire. Although Thorstein and Thord mimic the upper class equestrian behaviors, they reveal their lack of masculine honor by fighting with their fists and thus becoming no better than the beasts themselves.

Another saga in which a poor man engages in horse fight is *Gudmund Dyre's Saga*. Here the poor man's horse loses and the man resorts to physical violence in an attempt to salvage his honor.⁴⁴ While the poor man's stallion proves that wealth did not necessarily determine one's ability to own a horse, it probably determined the quality of horse a man might own or be able to acquire. Also, again we see a man of lesser status

⁴² Palsson, Hermann. *Hrafnkel's Saga and Other Icelandic Stories*. New York: Penguin Books, 1972. Pp 72-81

⁴³ Solheim, Svale. *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*. Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1956. P. 55.

⁴⁴ Solheim, Svale. *Horse-Fight and Horse-Race in Norse Tradition*. Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1956. P. 57.

becoming no better than his fighting stallion, fighting with his fists in an attempt to salvage his honor.

VIII. Conclusion

Beyond their practical roles, horses in medieval Iceland were a symbolic outward expression of masculine honor, and that masculine honor was attainable by members of either sex. Members of the lower class mimicked the equestrian expression of masculine honor, but were often equated with their horses rather than seen as riding above them. One particular insult of sexual defamation summarizes the gendered and classed masculine honor as seen through an equestrian perspective. Gera meri ór, or to make a mare of someone, was a highly insulting remark from the time. It implied reducing one's foe to the status of a mare, an object symbolizing passive homosexual rape and bestiality. As such, one's opponent was simultaneously forced down into the category of femininity, deprived of masculine honor, and equated with a "despicable female animal."⁴⁵ After throwing out such a demeaning insult, who knows, the masculine and honorable accuser probably galloped off on his virile stallion.

⁴⁵ Sayers, William. "Sexual Defamation in Medieval Iceland: Gera Meri Ór Einum 'Make a Mare of Someone'" North-Western European Language Evolution 30 (1997). P. 32

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