

Analysis of the "vinland sagas" essay sample

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“ Barbarians...thrusting their swords through everything, taking pity on nothing. The destruction is universal... Like a whirlwind or a typhoon or a torrent or I know now what to say”; “... inhumanity”; “...barbarous tribe”; “... harshness of its manners and the savagery of its character”; “...not respecting female weakness, not pitying tender infants”.

Above are a few of the terms used by the Constantinople patriarch Photius to describe Vikings and their actions; but similarly horrific descriptions of the Vikings are to be found in numerous sources, Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh and the writings of Alcuin of Lindisfarne to name just two. To a large extent this image remains, even today, the stereotypical image of Scandinavians during the “ Viking Age”. However this is a very one-sided view, and ignores the full picture. A society where everyone behaved like the men described in the above quote simply would not last, let alone reach the degree of organisation that existed, for example, in Denmark. The way Vikings are viewed in countries outside the Scandinavian region is slowly changing, but unfortunately the classic Viking stereotype still reigns. In order to get a fairer and more balanced view of the Vikings, it is necessary to look at the topic from the point of view of the Vikings themselves as well as from that of outsiders. This can be found in the sagas.

The sagas “ Graenlendinga Saga” and “ Eirik’s Saga”; are two of the best known Icelandic sagas, since they are the main literary sources for the Vikings in North America. Therefore there has been a tendency to study them from a very narrow point of view, with the primary objective of using

them to establish the exact locations of the parts of America reached by the Vikings. However this is not the most useful way to study sagas as historical sources; as the Sawyers point out in their book *Medieval Scandinavia*:

"[Icelandic sagas'] reliability as sources for the details of political or military events, individual careers, and even family history is doubtful, but the generally consistent picture they give of social structure, conduct, beliefs, and values must have some basis in reality". This essay will avoid the, by now pointless, typical approach to these two sagas and instead use them to provide an inside view of Viking society, its values and its ideals.

One of the most striking aspects of Viking Age Scandinavian society, as described in the sagas, is the importance of, and fascination with, exploration. In one scene described in the *Greenland saga*, Bjarni Herjolfson, reports his sighting of previously unknown lands. Bjarni had been seen as " a man of much promise. From early youth he had been eager to sail to foreign lands" , but now he was subjected to criticism. Despite the fact that he had not been on a voyage of exploration, people " thought he had shown a great lack of curiosity [in not landing on and exploring these lands] ...and he was criticised for this". Further on in the saga, Thorstein Karlsefni is subject to the same pressure to explore: " There was still the same talk about Vinland voyages as before, and everyone, including [his wife], kept urging Karlselfni to make the voyage [to the recently discovered lands]". Expeditions to the newly discovered lands " were considered a good source of fame and fortune" .

Another value that society expected of people was bravery. Several scenes in the sagas describe how individuals are determined to show that they are

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not afraid to die. When Thorvald Eirikson is shot in the groin by an arrow, he merely pulls it out and remarks "" This is a rich country we have found; there is plenty of fat around my entrails."" Likewise, later on in the saga, as Bjarni gives up his life for one of his companions, he scorns: " " I can see that you would spare no effort to live, and are afraid to die."" In another scene, when a group of Viking men flee from an attack by a (presumably much larger) group of natives, they are scorned and mocked by one of their womenfolk, Freydis, who shouts: "" Why do you flee from such pitiful wretches, brave men like you? You should be able to slaughter them like cattle. If I had weapons, I am sure I could fight better than any of you.""

These scenes show the importance that the society placed upon bravery; but it was not expected to the point of recklessness. The heroes of the sagas are sensible and have a clear sense of judgement, for example when Leif falls in love with a woman in Norway, " he did not think it advisable for him to abduct a woman in a foreign country- " for there are so few of us."" Leif is praised as " a shrewd man and always moderate in his behaviour". The hero of Eirik's saga, Eirik himself, does not pursue a bloody feud with his enemy but rather " a reconciliation was arranged between them".

Nevertheless, there are also many aspects to the characters' way of thinking that to modern readers would seem completely illogical, even ridiculous.

Magnusson and Palsson describe the approach of the author of Eirik's saga as a " self-conscious seeking after fact, a carefully-projected attitude of objectivity" ; yet one of the characters in this saga is a Uniped. Indeed it was a common belief that Unipeds lived in Africa . Yet perhaps more important to helping us to understand the ideology of the society are the frequent

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references to superstition and omens, which greatly affected people's behaviour and decision-making. In the Graenlendinga saga, it is told how Eirik had been planning to accompany his son on an expedition; however he falls off his horse on the way to the ship and sees this as a bad omen, a sign that he shouldn't go: "" I am not meant to discover any more countries than this one we live in"" . Another superstitious belief was that luck was a personal trait, like bravery or humour. As the editor of one translation of Eirik's saga puts it " Good luck or ill luck were innate qualities", and ran in a family; for example the saga tells how Eirik was gifted with " more luck than any of his kinsmen", and Eirik's son Leif inherited his good luck.

There was a belief of an afterlife where " it was the actual corpse of the dead person that could become active, not only his spirit" , and this is illustrated in both the sagas in a way that can seem very amusing to the modern reader. In the Graenlendinga saga, after Thorstein the Black's wife Grimhild dies, it is remarked that: " There is something very odd about Grimhild. She is raising herself on her elbow and pushing her feet out of bed and groping for her shoes" ; and shortly afterwards another corpse " suddenly sat up" and speaks, in order to tell his widow her fortune. (That the deceased's premonition is accurate is one example showing how the society believed completely in the ability to tell the future). It is worth noting however, that not all aspects of people's attitude to death were different from that of our own society. For example the consecration and proper burial of corpses appear as very important to Christians; as in the Graenlendinga saga, when, after Thorvald Eiriksson dies and is buried in the newly discovered Vinland, Thorstein is " eager to go to Vinland to fetch back the body of his brother".

The proper care of the dead was just the extension of the enormously important ideal of camaraderie and helping people who were in trouble. Several times we see good camaraderie between members of the one expedition too, as in the Graenlendinga saga where Leif gets distressed when Tyrlic goes missing, or in Eirik's saga when Karlsefni sets out to try and find Thorhall the hunter, who has left the group. However, it seems the duty of characters to protect, not just comrades, but also strangers, from distress. This is especially evident in the Graenlendinga saga when Leif is sailing near Greenland and catches sight of a reef with people on it; Leif tells his crew: "I want to sail close into the wind in order to reach these people...If they need our help it is our duty to give it". But this duty towards strangers did not end there; it was also expected that one would offer them hospitality if they had no place to stay. Neither was this just a feature of Christianity, as we can see when Thorstein the Black, a pagan, introduces himself to Thorstein Eiriksson who has landed in Greenland's Western settlement: "I am called Thorstein the black.

I have come here to invite you and your wife to come and stay with me". Indeed, Thorstein the Black seems almost apologetic in telling his guest: "... you will find life in my house very dull, for there are only the two of us, my wife and myself, and I am very unsociable." In one scene in Eirik's saga, the protagonist "was not to be outdone in generosity" and offers two crews, are of whom are strangers to him to be his guests for the winter. Then it is described how Eirik "became much less cheerful than usual". Fearing that he will not have enough provisions to prepare a proper Christmas feast he tells his guests "You have accepted my hospitality with courtesy and good

grace... I should not it to be said that you have had to endure such a meagre Christmas as the one that is now approaching””.

In stark contrast to these friendly and generous ideals, we also see instances of cruelty towards strangers. One particularly vivid and seemingly unjustifiable instance of this can be seen in the Graenlendinga saga when Thorvald and his companions, during their exploration of a part of Vinland, come across three “ skin-boats with three men under each of them”.

Completely unprovoked, Thorvald kill the men, except for one, who manages to escape. Why this unprovoked murder of natives? Perhaps there are two factors which “ justify” it. Firstly, it seems that courtesy and generosity towards strangers is almost exclusively expected when strangers are in difficulty; that a man should not be seen to refuse help to someone who needs it (whereas these natives don’t seem to have been in any difficulties). Yet this alone surely wouldn’t justify their being killed. It appears, rather, that throughout the two sagas there is extreme racism by Scandinavians towards this other race. Even the name given to the natives of this land, Skraelings “ has contemptuous associations- something like wretches”.

Hallberg writes that: “ The saga observes a strict epic detachment; the narrator’s ego is completely suppressed” and this is true throughout the most part of these two sagas. However the Skraelings and their actions are often described in ways that were probably meant to amuse the people listening to the sagas, and laugh and scorn at the supposed stupidity of the Skraelings. For example, it is described how, after a battle, one of the Skraelings comes finds one of the Norsemen’s axes; in Graenlendinga saga he swings it at one of his companions, who then throws it into the sea; in Eirik’s saga he swings <https://assignbuster.com/analysis-of-the-vinland-sagas-essay-sample/>

it at a rock and, “ thinking it worthless now because it could not withstand stone...threw it away”. It is also, in several instances, how the Norsemen cunningly exploit, fool or trick the natives.

Graenlendinga saga sees the Norsemen using milk to buy goods from the natives, “ the result was that the Skraelings carried their purchases away in their bellies, and left their packs and furs with Karlsefni and his men” . In Eirik’s saga the Norsemen use red cloth to trade and “ the cloth began to run short; then Karlsefni and his men cut it up into pieces which were no more than a finger’s breadth wide; but the Skraelings paid just as much or even more for it” . Obviously the Norsemen considered the Skraelings as very inferior to them, and perhaps this was the case for all other races- and hence piracy and raids on other countries would have been seen as justifiable?

Another group of people who seem to regard others (this time people of the same race) as inferior to them were Christian Vikings. As was the case in many countries during the period of conversion to Christianity, paganism was much more tolerant of Christianity than vice-versa. For example Thorstein the Black tells Thorstein Eiriksson that he is “” of a different than yours (Christianity), although I consider yours to be better than mine”” . This is a very different attitude than, for example, that of Eirik’s wife (a newly converted Christian) toward paganism; she “ refused to live with Eirik (who remained pagan) after she was converted”. Similarly, during a pagan ritual held to see into the future, Thorbjorn Vifilsson “ had refused to remain in the house while such pagan practices were being performed”. It seems that Christians were very proud of their religion, to the point of looking down on others of a different faith.

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Their can also be seen a similar snobbiness in relation to class; as in Eirik's saga when a proposed husband for his daughter is suggested to Thorbjorn. He obviously wants his family to have a high class status as he exclaims: "" I never expected to hear such a suggestion from you (his friend Orm)- that I should marry my daughter to the son of a slave! ...such a meagre match"". In a very similar manner, Karlsefni's mother, on meeting his wife, " felt he had married beneath him, and she stayed away from his home for the first winter".

The above-described instances also highlight another feature of Scandinavian society at the time: the importance, and pride taken in, the family. It was a man's duty to avenge sins against members of his family. For example in the Graenlendinga saga, when Freydis wants some people killed, she tells her husband (untruthfully): "...they struck me and handled me very roughly. But you, you wretch, would never avenge either my humiliation or your own". Eventually her husband can " bear her taunts no longer", and goes and kills the men. People were also ever-aware of who their fathers (second names were a constant reminder) and forefathers had been; in fact one role of sagas was probably to glorify the ancestors of certain people. One's wrongdoings could result in bad fate for their descendants, as for example when Leif finds out about the people that his sister Freydis has unjustly killed; Leif says: "" I do not have the heart...to punish my sister Freydis as she deserves. But I prophesy that her descendants will never prosper"". Alternately a family line could have good fate; for example a prophetess tells Gudrid of how she will go to Iceland, "" where you will start a great and eminent family line, and over your progeny there shall shine a

bright light.”” One would be identified, and have either good or bad fate, according to their family.

In conclusion, the Vinland sagas are not just of use to us in trying to establish where exactly Vinland was. From analysing them from a different perspective one can get an insight into the ideals and values of Scandinavian society in the Viking Age. It was a society where exploration was much admired with fascination, where a man was expected to be brave and sensible and to help others who he found in distress. Yet at the same time, this was a very superstitious society and a society that looked down on foreigners. Individuals took great pride in the way people regarded them, and also in their family and class; and Christians were obnoxiously proud of their religion. Studying insider sources, such as sagas; it becomes clear how all too many foreign sources only give us a narrow, one sided view of a highly complex society, that of the Vikings.

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