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Review of *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*

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Unlike *Beowulf* and the *Commedia* the Icelandic family sagas have not benefited from sustained able criticism. Saga criticism has been mired for years in inconclusive debates on origins, whether oral or written, and influences, whether Germanic or Christian. The sagas themselves have been virtually ignored. This is especially unfortunate because the sagas are as dense as an anthropologist’s field notebook with histories of disputes and analyses of dispute systems. Yet for all this wealth of material the debate on saga historicity has centered on whether the sagas are accurate chronicles. Since they, of course, fail on that ground they were also held, without
discussion, to fail as trustworthy or even useful documents for the study of social history, law, and dispute-processing institutions.

Jesse L. Byock's book is a part of a growing trend to rescue the study of the sagas from the formalists who did them some service and the moralists who did them none at all. He attempts to place the sagas firmly within the social context that produced them: the sagas are self-evidently stories about the feud, composed by and for people who feuded. It is from the feuding process, not from continental or early Germanic models, that the saga writers derived their "formal model for saga narratives" (p. 2). The formal model that Byock discovers is composed of "three active elements — conflict, advocacy, resolution." These elements "define the Icelandic process of dispute and its settlement" (p. 57). They also are the "active narrative elements" which the saga writer combines in various ways to tell his story and in this role they are given the unfortunate name "feudeme." (The linguistic metaphor simply adds another layer of "meta" to the analysis making it, in fact, less scientific than it would otherwise be.) Feudemes, that is, units of conflict, advocacy, and resolution, together with "units of travel and information" (pp. 63–67) are combined in various ways by the saga writers to form "clusters," which in turn form "chains of feud which are the backbone of Icelandic prose narrative" (p. 58). Any feudeme could begin or end a cluster. To Byock the advantage in the scheme is that it did not lock the writer into a fixed sequential narrative order as earlier schema describing saga narrative purported to do. The saga writer was in effect free to tell it the way it was: "Feudemic construction — building from feudemes to clusters to chains — is tied to the development of feud in traditional social terms rather than to the artistic originality of the individual saga author" (p. 115). Two chapters (7 and 9) are devoted to showing how a selection of episodes from *Landnámabók*, the *Sturlunga* sagas, and the family sagas reflects various arrangements of feudemes. The selection of sources illustrates another of Byock's arguments, one well taken, that these sources are more similar than not in matters of narrative technique and descriptions of dispute processing (pp. 5, 123).

From the point of view of disputing institutions the book's results are somewhat varied. And it seems that much of the problem is directly related to the feudemic model. The chapters on conflict and resolution are disappointing. It does not tell us much to note that conflicts arose over "material goods" and "non-material issues" and list examples (pp. 68–73). The discussion of resolution somehow manages to ignore totally the distinction between a legal action carried to judgment and an arbitrated settlement. The former, when discussed at all, is treated as wholly included within the concept of arbitration (pp. 102–4). There is also much capricious classification. Thus issuing a summons to appear at the thing is classified as a conflict (p. 72) rather than the advocacy of one's legal claim, whereas buying up someone's expectation of inheritance to justify an expropriation of a weak kin group's property is called "self-advocacy" rather than conflict (p. 93). But when the discussion stays away from the "conflict, advocacy, and resolution" model Byock is capable of enlightening commentary. Hence it is that the best discussion of conflict occurs in chapter (8) devoted to land disputes in which the feudemic analysis appears in a secondary role, almost as an afterthought.

Perhaps the most useful contribution occurs in the discussion of "advocacy (brokerage)," which treats the process by which disputants sought and obtained support from third parties to aid in the assertion or defense of rights and claims. These third parties are referred to as brokers. Brokers were prominent men in the
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community, usually but not necessarily of the goði class. The roles they played in disputes were varied and wide ranging: they could intervene as counselors, pleaders of lawsuits, or fighters. Byock is at his best when discussing the process of support gathering and he is able to give sensitive readings of the saga scenes in which the efforts of parties to recruit support for the prosecution and defense of their claims are described (pp. 163–64). His successes occur in spite of definitional and analytical confusions. There are occasions where it is crucial but very difficult to ascertain whether his point applies to the person seeking support or to the power broker (e.g., pp. 40–42, 75–76).

The advocacy feudeme, however, is asked ultimately to bear too great a strain. What appropriateness the concept might have in describing the acts of brokerage grows ever weaker as we descend through the four other categories of advocacy: “information passing,” “goadung,” “arbitration” (also treated in the resolution chapter), and “self-advocacy” (pp. 92–97). Traveling beggarwomen who bear information about the movements of men in a district are in Byock’s view of the feud somehow engaging in an activity structurally identical to a goði’s agreement to support a litigant’s lawsuit (see, e.g., p. 188). Giving a succinct definition of “advocacy” that encompasses categories of action as varied as these is beyond my powers.

Probably the most serious problem with the feudemes of conflict, advocacy, and resolution is that they have virtually no explanatory power. They in no way differentiate a twentieth-century American divorce from a thirteenth-century Icelandic bloodfeud. Although no anthropological literature is cited, Byock appears to have accepted, without discussion, the views of the “peace-in-the-feud” school (see, e.g., pp. 2, 25, 28, 207). This is a theory about the feud’s social function; it is not, however, a description of a feud’s structure. We never really get a sense of how the feud works. Feud and dispute are for the most part used interchangeably, and unless it be in the ability to form chains or in the claimant’s seeking of brokerage we are given little indication of how to differentiate them (e.g., pp. 42–46, 180). At the very least the feud requires some notions of corporate or vicarious liability; it is not simply an affair between individuals who might seek support from other individuals functioning as brokers. Nor does the book ever distinguish carefully the different Icelandic dispute-processing systems: the formal legal system characterized by hypertechnical requirements of publishing, summoning, pleading, etc.; the more informal arbitral systems; and the bloodfeud itself. The interrelationships of these systems are at times quite complex, and a discussion of the Icelandic feud should take some account of them. Such a discussion would also have to account for passive as well as active solidarity of the feuding group. Byock ignores the former while his treatment of “advocacy (brokerage)” misrepresents the latter. He does not note that the group recruited for support in a law case or an arbitrated agreement may not be composed in the same way as the group recruited for vengeance taking. Any definitive discussion of the process of gathering support must first take account of exactly what the support is being mustered for. Because Byock has focused his discussion of feud primarily on scenes where support was being sought for the prosecution or defense of legal actions, or for the arbitrated settlement of disputes, he is led to downplay kinship obligation, which figures prominently in vengeance taking, in favor of the goði-bóndi bond, which figures prominently in legal actions.

In spite of these criticisms the book deserves to be read. It has some sensible and sensitive readings of individual saga scenes. Appendix A gives a good short account of legal terms and social relationships in the commonwealth period. But above all the
book does the invaluable service of identifying the most fruitful area for future work in saga studies: dispute settlement and processing.

A few last words. The book is nicely printed and Byock has supplemented his discussions with very helpful maps. I note the following errors: p. 182, l. 11 "Gunnarr" should probably read "Njalssons"; the tölftarkviðr, p. 216, n.3, is not "a panel of twelve chieftains" but a panel of twelve selected by a chieftain (Grágás, 1a, 66–67); "handslap," p. 217, l. 16, for "handclasp" (?); and on p. 262, l. 13, it is Hrútr who gives Ösvífr the cloak, not Hóskuldr.

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