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CHIEFLY CONSUMPTION IN COMMONWEALTH ICELAND

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Abstract

For 400 years from 870 there was a stratified society without a state in Iceland. Manipulating reciprocal exchanges, chieftains built entourages of followers in other classes and coalitions among themselves. In their political maneuvers, chieftains consumed such imported luxury goods as clothing, weaponry, wood for houses, and grain for brewing. Chiefly consumption and subsistence requirements for grain created demand for foreign goods. I analyse the social-political context of luxury consumption, and its relationship to changing patterns of production, exchange, cultural patterns, trade with Norway, and the development of internicine strife from 1220 to 1262 which ended when the warring chieftains yielded authority to the king of Norway.

## I Introduction

Mauss opens his essay on the gift with a lengthy quotation from Havamál, the speech or matters of the high one, ancient aphorisms about the proper conduct of life collected and recorded sometime during the Icelandic Commonwealth. Among the passages he quotes (1967:xiv) on gift-giving are:

Friends should rejoice each others' hearts with gifts of weapons and raiment, that is clear from one's own experience. That friendship lasts longest--if there is a chance of its being a success--in which friends both give and receive gifts.

And:

Know--if you have a friend in whom you have sure confidence and wish to make use of him, you ought to exchange ideas and gifts with him and go to see him often.

And:

Generous and bold men have the best time in life and never foster troubles. But the coward is apprehensive of everything and a miser is always groaning over his gifts.

We are used to thinking of consumption as driving production and distribution in capitalist economic systems (see Henry 1963). Mauss was concerned with societies in which neither the general realm of the economic nor the specific aspect of consumption had been separated from other aspects of life, but in which there were "total acts," each with aspects which we in a more

differentiated society might label religious, economic, political, or social. To use Polanyi's aphorism (1944:57), the economic is embedded in the social.

During Commonwealth Iceland, political processes provided much of the impetus for consumption of goods beyond basic subsistence needs, that vast realm of consumption needs which Marx relegates to historical and moral determination (Capital p. 275). In this sub-arctic herding economy, meat and milk products from sheep and cattle were major subsistence goods along with the fruits of the hunt at sea and on land. There was limited use value for quantities of woolen goods. Because wool could be converted into foreign luxury goods, it gained exchange value apart from its limited use value. It replaced silver as a medium of exchange and for the calculation of exchange equivalencies among other goods. It came to be a standard for purchase, inheritance, dowry, and legal awards. To make an analogy with modern times we might say that woolen goods circulated like paper money, but the value was based not on gold, silver, or the promises of governments, but on the potential for conversion into foreign luxury goods. These goods, obtained in various ways especially from Norway, were in demand among the chiefly class. It is the source of this demand, the uses of these goods, that I will examine here. First, a few examples.

## II Chiefly Consumption

Major items of chiefly consumption were fine clothes; grain for brewing in connection with feasts; wood for houses, and later, churches; and weaponry. None of these was available in

Iceland. Before Gízur Þorvaldsson succeeded in unifying the chieftains of Iceland in 1262, his enemies attacked him and burned his establishment at Flugmýr. He escaped though many of his allies and kinsmen perished. Chapter 174 of The Saga of the Icelanders catalogues the losses (1):

A great deal of wealth, much of it owned by those who were at Flugumýr when it was burned, was destroyed there. Many men had brought their valuables, their eider downs, and other costly possessions, and all this was burned. But by far the greatest wealth burned up was Gízur's--first of all the establishment itself at Flugumýr, which was unequalled by any other in Skagafjörð except the see at Hólar. All the buildings had been made with great care: the entrance hall was entirely paneled up to the main room; the hall and other rooms were completely hung with tapestries. Many treasures which Sturla's daughter Ingibjörg owned were also entirely burned up.

In Eyrbyggja Saga (ch 13), about 200 years earlier, Snorri Goði, later to develop a reputation for craftiness, is young and returning from Norway.

As they set out from the ship, these men of Breidafjörð, there was a world of difference between the outfit of Snorri and that of Thorleif Kimbi. Thorleif had bought the best horse he could get, along with an elaborate, painted saddle. He carried an ornamented sword, a gold-inlaid spear, and a dark-blue,

heavily gilded shield. All his clothes were of the very finest quality, and it was on this outfit that he'd spent most of his travelling money /fararefnum/. Snorri, on the other hand, was wearing a black cloak and was riding a fine black mare. He'd got an old trough-shaped saddle, and his weapons were nothing much to look at.

"Farar" means "trip or journey," "efni" means "stuff, things." "Fararefi" means "Stuff or things of travel, outfittings," not especially money. "Farareyrir" from "eyrir" an ounce of silver, would mean "traveling money." Later we learn that "everybody kept laughing at Snorri because of his outfit, and Bork said /tók Börkr svá á, at honum hefði óhepiliða með fé/ he must have had bad luck with his money and lost the whole lot."

The passage says Bork "took it that he had been unlucky with his wealth." Bork was Snorri's father's brother. Snorri's mother married Bork after her first husband, Snorri's father, was killed in a feud which is related in detail in Gísla saga. Snorri would inherit from Bork and he wanted to claim his inheritance immediately, especially the farm at Helgafell. When Snorri made his claim, Bork honored it (chapter 14), but he said that he did not think they could share the estate. He offered to buy Snorri out. Snorri replied that Bork could set the price, and let Snorri decide who would buy whom out. Bork agreed and set a price on the farm, but stipulated that Snorri must pay the full amount immediately without going into debt. Snorri agreed.

'Obviously, Bork,' said Snorri, 'you must be thinking me very short of money when you set such a low price on Helgafell. But I'm choosing to take my father's estate at this price, so give me your hand, and let's seal the bargain.'

'I'm not doing that till every penny's been paid,' said Bork.

Snorri then paid the money and had as much left over. Bork accepted the money and relinquished ownership to Snorri. He said, "Your purse turned out to be fuller than I'd expected, kinsman."

Bork's expectations of Snorri are based on his appearance, a cultural convention Snorri knows well enough to turn to his own advantage to trick his uncle.

Borkel, Guðrún Osvífsdóttir's fourth husband, lives at Helgafell, which Guðrun had acquired from Snorri. In chapter 74 of Laxdæla saga he dreams that his beard is so big that it spreads over all of Breiðafjörð. He interprets this to mean that his power and authority will extend over the whole of the district. His wife suggests it could mean that he will fall into the bay of that name. That summer Þorkel goes to Norway to get timber for a church. King Ólaf receives him well with gifts of silver and a cloak as well as timber. In the spring, when the timber is being loaded into Þorkel's ship, the king goes out for a morning walk and sees a man climbing on the large church he is having built.

He was most astonished for it was a good deal earlier in the morning than the workmen were used to being up.

The king recognized the man. There was Thorkel Eyjólfsson and he was putting the measuring rod to all the largest beams: the crossbeams, the sills, and the upright supports. The king headed right over there and said: "What's this now, Thorkel, are you thinking of fashioning the timber you are freighting to Iceland after this church here?" Thorkel replied: "That's the truth of it, my lord." Then King Ólaf spoke: "Now you just cut off two ells from every beam, and that church of yours will still be the biggest one ever built in Iceland." Thorkel answered: "You can keep your wood, if you think you have given away too much or have regrets on second thought, but not one ell will I cut off. I've enough initiative and drive to get myself some other wood." Then the king said to him, gently and soberly: "Two things can certainly be said of you, Thorkel--you are a man of much account, but now you are putting on too big airs for your own good. For it is nothing but presumption for a peasant's son /bóndasyni/ to think of vying with us."

"Bóndi" means "land-owning farmer," not "peasant." The king says he does not begrudge him timber, that the church could never be big enough to hold all his conceit, and he prophesizes that Þórkel will get no use of the timber. Þórkel returns to Iceland.

Thorkel now sat at home on his farm throughout the winter. He had a Yule drinking at Helgafell and it was very well attended, and all in all he carried on in



great estate that winter. And Guðrún put no stop to it, but said that was what money /fé/ was for -- to increase your pride and prestige /at menn miklaði sik af, ok þat mundi ok á framreitum/; and whatever Guðrún needed in order to live in grand style had to be on hand. That winter Þorkel shared with his friends many of the treasures he had brought from abroad.

"Fé" is better translated as "wealth" than "money." "Ad mikla sik af" means "to make oneself great" and "framreitr" are the forebeds of gardens, the metaphoric meaning is "to display or make a show of." Hence, the sense of the passage is to use wealth to aggrandize and show oneself off. This is precisely the function I am suggesting for all of the items of chiefly consumption. Before he could build the church, Þorkel drowned in the bay of which he had dreamed.

When the Icelandic sagas spend a few lines describing a weapon or a person's dress, it is not simply for literary impact but an important sociological statement. From a person's dress and weapons we learn what he has to offer in the way of support and whether it might be worth while to make a social investment of some wealth to make an alliance with him or her.

Chapter 32 of Njal's saga tells us that Gunnar's brother, Kolskegg, urged him to ride to the Alþing.

'Your honour will be enhanced, for many will come to see you there,' he said.

'It has never been my nature to show off /at hrósa mér/,' said Gunnar, 'But I always like the company of worthy men.'

"At hrósa" means "to praise," with the first person dative pronoun, "to praise myself, to boast." It is as though this trip to the Alþing, after his successful journey abroad must necessarily be boastful. Chapter 33 opens with:

Gunnar and his company rode to the Althing. When they arrived, they were so well dressed that no one there could compare with them, and people came out of every booth to marvel at them.

. . . One day, as he was walking from the Law Rock, Gunnar went down past the Mosfell booth. There he saw some well-dressed women coming towards him; the one in the lead was the best dressed of all. . . . She said that her name was Hallgerd. . . .

These two well-dressed people get married and have many adventures together until Gunnar gets killed. The point here is the importance of their fine clothes to social calculation. The same judgements are entailed in houses, horses, trappings, weapons, feasts, and gifts.

The system of reciprocal relationships entailed in the chieftain-follower and chieftain-chieftain relationships, here as in other such systems, are related to the consumption of display objects that indicate the ability of a person to enter reciprocal relationships. Hence the central importance of the goods of chiefly consumption.

### III Chieftaincy, the Assembly, and Reciprocity

Shortly after Norsemen discovered Iceland during the last half of the 9th century, the first permanent settlers began to arrive. According to the Icelandic literary-historical tradition they were fleeing the tyranny of the Norwegian king, Harald Finehair. Those chieftains who opposed Harald or who by action or inaction fell into his disfavor fled with followers and slaves to other parts, some to the recently discovered Iceland. As British kings consolidated their rules, Norsemen in the British Isles found life less comfortable and joined their kinsmen in Iceland.

In Iceland the first act of chieftains was to claim land. Their second act was to distribute land to their followers and establish household economies. The settlers brought stratification with them. There was never equal access to basic resources (Fried 1967).

From the beginning there had been local assemblies (þing), but about 930 the general assembly (Alþing) was established based on the law tradition of the Gula assembly in Norway.

The Alþing was the major institution of Iceland. It met once each year and each chieftain was obliged to attend. Here law was made and changed, and cases were adjudicated according to complex procedures. Of all the cases brought before the Alþing, very few received any legal resolution. Most were resolved by violence or arbitration (Miller 1984). Even if a plaintiff won a legal verdict, enforcement was his duty, and there was no "executive" agency to carry out decisions of the Alþing. From

recorded cases it is obvious that most decisions hinged not on procedural nicety, innocence or guilt, or any concept of justice but rather on the amount of force amassed behind each side (Magnusson 1977:23; Jones 1935:21). In terms of its real functions, then, the Alþing was not primarily a legal institution. It was, rather, like the meetings of the American Anthropological Association, an arena for building coalitions, for making, breaking, and testing connections.

There was no state. The centuries of the Commonwealth provide an elaborated version of Fried's pessimistic scenario of life in a stratified society without a state. The system of restraints and balances "is doomed to increasing incidence of failure" (1967:225).

The relationship between followers (þingmenn) and chieftains (goðar) was voluntary. If one were not a chieftain, he had to follow some chieftain, but which one was his choice. Relationships among chieftains were equally voluntary. There were two sorts of groups. One was the following or entourage of a chieftain: the other was the coalition of chieftains. Both kinds of relationships depended on reciprocity. Both parties to a relationship had to see some advantage to maintaining it. Kinship relationships played very little role as Rich (1976) has pointed out. In fact many sagas (e.g. Viga Glúms saga, Gísla saga, Laxdæla saga) detail feud relationships between and among members of what would be bilateral kindreds, had there been such organizations (see Phillipotts 1913).

Mutual support, gift giving, visiting, and feasting were major components of coalition relationships, and when a chieftain wanted to initiate such a relationship with another, it was typically by an invitation to visit, an offer of support, an invitation to a feast, or a gift. One of the surest signs of friendship was mutual feasting in which each party feasted the other on alternate years as for instance Gunnar and Njal in Njal's saga (Ch 35). One of the surest signs of enmity was to attend different feasts close by to each other on the same occasion as e.g. Gisli and his brother Þórkell in Gísla saga (Ch 15). The "feasting" unit is the same as the "support" unit, though it may not be very stable. It is for this reason that the sagas often record in detail who attended what feasts and how they were arranged. Such accounts indicate how the alliances aligned at a moment.

To be a chieftain, one had to be able to sponsor such feasts with enough drink brewed from grain to keep people in a festive mood for some days at a time. One had to be able to offer support and to deliver it. Hence, one had to have a sound entourage. Without an entourage, a chieftain's friendship was meaningless. A chieftain had to be able to support and protect his followers. If he could not or did not, there was no reason to belong to his entourage. In Njal's saga, the chieftain Mordur falls on hard times when his followers abandon him. When his father, Valgard the Grey, returns from abroad he chastises him for the way he has managed the family's chieftaincy:

He said to Mord, 'I have ridden all over the district, and I can hardly recognize it as the same. . . . What is the meaning of this disgrace?'

'New chieftaincies and a Fifth Court have been instituted here,' replied Mord, 'and people have been withdrawing their allegiance from me and giving it to Hoskuld Hvitaness-Priest.'

Valgard said, 'It is poor repayment for the chieftaincy I entrusted to you that you have administered it so feebly. I want you now to pay back Njal's family in a way that will drag them all to destruction; . . . divide them by slander, and make the Njalssons kill Hoskuld. . . . and the death of the Njalssons would inevitably follow.'

Miller (1983) shows how the killing of Höskuld is a political act. As in any such system, whether a Melanesian big-man system or a Thai entourage, the largess of the "center man," "big man," "patron," or chieftain provides the coherence for the group. In the Icelandic, as in other social systems, people must be able to make accurate predictions about how others can and will react to events. One indication of chieftains' ability to provide support to followers or other chieftains, was their observable level of consumption of wealth. This was the central point of Snorri's trick by misdirection.

The fineness of one's house, clothes, weapons, horses, and trappings all were indicators of a chieftain's ability to offer

support, to concentrate significant force for his own purposes, and those of his friends and followers.

#### IV Process

From the time of settlement until the turn of the Twentieth Century cattle and sheep were the mainstays of the economy. Fish and sea animals were important as well (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1985). Without detailed archaeological work it is not possible to assign relative weights to these components. Culturally and conceptually, however, cattle were used as the standard for assessing independent status and as one measure of wealth. McGovern, Bigelow, and Russell (1985) have provided a detailed analysis of the ecology of grazing during this period.

By 930 the island was fully claimed if not fully settled, and by 1000 some people had less than sufficient land to support themselves and began to offer their labor for sale. Chieftains and other slave holders began to hire labor and to free slaves since wage workers were less costly to maintain than slaves. As more slaves were freed there were more people with less than adequate land to support themselves and thus more people available for wage labor. Various forms of land rental also developed.

The cost of labor in slaves had been a constraint to the amount of land even a large land holder could productively use. With wage labor and rental relationships, this constraint was removed and there was no upper limit on the size of land holdings. Large land holders began to expand their holdings. The forms of appropriation of labor, both wages and rental

arrangments, rested on a concept of ownership. There was no state to enforce ownership. One owned what one could hold. As people began to expand holdings, the level of violence escalated. By the mid thirteenth-century five chiefly families controlled all of Iceland.

In the second half of the 13th century, the chieftains of the Icelandic Commonwealth pledged their allegiances to the king of Norway, thus ending a nearly four-hundred year long history of a stratified society without a state and initiating a dependency relationship that would not be sundered until 1944 (Durrenberger and Pálsson 1985). The Sturlung age, the last decades of the Commonwealth, was a period of the kind of turmoil that Fried's (1967) analysis of political systems would lead us to expect. Out of this chaos came not only a fair share of violence and betrayal, of saints and sinners, but one of the world's great literatures.

Chieftains consumed such goods as timber for houses and churches, grain for brewing, imported weapons and clothing to support their friends and followers and to indicate, by the level of their generosity and consumption their ability to support others (see Durrenberger 1976). These functions are integral aspects of the institution of chieftaincy which persisted from the first settlement until 1262. The context for the functioning of the institution of chieftaincy changed over the course of time (Durrenberger 1985), and the watershed period seems to be about the year 1000 when wage labor became available because the land



was crowded enough that some people had insufficient land to meet their needs.

With this less costly source of labor, large land holders began to expand their holdings. Whereas chieftains had gone overseas to obtain luxury goods in the early part of the Commonwealth, few did in the later period. It was more important to stay in Iceland to manage the entourages and coalitions necessary to insure enough force to maintain claims to land ownership on which the extraction of value rested. At the same time, and for the same reasons, the necessity for foreign goods increased. For a while Norwegian traders came to Iceland.

At the end of the twelfth century, prices for imports to Iceland became quite high because of scarcity in Norway, and because alternate sources of wool had developed in Europe. The exchange value of Icelandic wool, the only major export product, dropped relative to grain and other foreign products. There was an overabundance of woolens in Iceland and a scarcity of grain (Gelsinger 1981:162). In 1192 there was a famine and 2,400 people died of hunger and disease (Gelsinger 1981:8). The Norwegian trade diminished because the traders had no use for Icelandic wool and had no grain to sell. The climate began to grow cooler in 1200 with longer winters and shorter summers.

By this time there were no slaves or freed slaves. There were people who owned land and those who did not. Among those who did not were some who rented land from landowners under various types of arrangements, and those who tried to subsist on

wage-work. There was also a category of homeless poor who wandered from place to place with no fixed means of subsistence.

Those who had access to sufficient resources to support a household were legally defined as tax paying farmers, bændur. Each of them had to be a follower of a chieftain from his own quarter. Chieftains were dependent on farmers for support -- to feed their increasingly large personal followings or armies, to support them at assemblies, to accompany them on raids on other chieftains or their followers, and to defend them from such raids. Without such support and the ability to amass force, claims to ownership of land, which defined the class system as well as the forms of appropriation, had no force. Farmers had to rely on some chieftain to be able to defend their claims to property, though this might lead in the end to the loss of the property. Chieftains had to rely on farmers to enforce their followers' claims and their own as well as to expand their territories into others' and to defend themselves.

By definition, each farmer, bóndi, represented a unit of household production, and his main interest in the political system was to maintain that status. As chieftains strove to expand their power, their demands on their followers became heavier. The farmers wanted to live to cut another field of hay or shear another flock of sheep and to collect their rents from their tenants.

There was a conflict between chieftains' increasing demands for demonstrations of force in support of claims to ownership and the subsistence demands, the economic roles, of farmers.

Chieftains sometimes used coercion to insure support. In spite of this contradiction, farmers had to rely on some chieftain in order to maintain their claims to land.

Relations between chieftains and farmers were not smooth. Chieftains had their "own" estates to support their establishments, and some maintained followings of armed men, but this was a difficult proposition, since it added consumers to the household without adding production (Durrenberger 1980). The chieftains had to rely on their followings of farmers to support them with both arms and supplies. This was one component of any farmer's household fund, his "rent" so to speak, his expenditures for travel and support for his cheiftain, without which his chieftain or another would take his land and livestock. In addition, expeditions took labor from the farm and put the farmer's life at risk. Even so, a farmer's claims to land were not secure, since his cheiftain might abandon him, another more powerful chieftain might claim his land, or simply take it, or a farmer might lose his land in a re-alignment of alliances among chieftains, which were frequent.

Support of chieftains, even if their support in return was dubious, was one of the conditions for heading an independent household. Dependent people, renters, cotters, and others, went with the household head. It was as close as one could come to a secure claim to land, and failure to provide support for chieftains was costly.

Independent householders appropriated the labor of the class of dependent renters and wage-workrs. The cheiftain class, who

based their claims on hereditary privilege and attempted to back them with force, appropriated the products and labor of householders in turn. They sometimes met overwhelming force from other chieftains.

Each chieftain had to attempt to muster overwhelming force. It was therefore not possible to maintain any balance of power among chieftains. In order to gain overwhelming force, each chieftain had to expand, and on an island such as Iceland, with limited resources, any expansion was at the cost of other chieftains. Such attempts at expansion on behalf of all the chieftains provide much of the dramatic action of the Sturlung period.

The alternative to expansion was to lose influence, the ability to make good one's claims, one's followers, and one's power as a chieftain. Each chieftain had to expand his influence or cease being a chieftain. The resources for expansion came from the householders' funds, from the production they appropriated from the landless workers as they replaced slaves. The "social cost" of the system was the creation and maintenance of a large class of poor and landless people.

In these conditions the institution of chieftaincy became exaggerated, the demand for luxury goods increased just at the time when the foreign trade was falling off and the Norwegian traders came less and less frequently.

We can see the differences between the periods before and after 1000 by examining the transactions recorded in the sagas. Here I use two sagas that record events of the period to just a

few years after 1000, Eyrbyggja saga and Víga Glúms saga. I use these two because they are famous for their lack of literary quality as much as for the time period they cover. It is unlikely that any of the transactions recorded have purely literary functions. For the later period I used Hvam Sturla's saga and Islendinga saga, both from the Sturlunga saga collection. The transactions are all of similar magnitude whether they entail land, weapons, dowery, livestock, or other valuables.

Tables 1 and 2 show the frequency of various types of transactions in each saga. Table 1 shows all transactions and Table 2 shows only those that entail land. The categories of transactions are constant from the early period, before 1000, and the late period 1000 to 1262--purchase, inheritance and dowery, gift, trade, forced transactions, and legal awards (see Miller 1986). Forced transactions range from outright theft to killing and theft to threats of killing. If one won a law case, or what was more likely, an arbitrated settlement, there was usually a substantial award which the loser had to pay. Such transactions I call "awards."

I totaled the two early and two late examples to obtain two sets of transactions to compare by means of the chi square test (1). Table 3 shows the chi square values for differences between the early and late periods for land transactions and other transactions. Table 4 shows the chi square values for differences between land and other transactions for the early and the late periods. The critical value for chi square with one

degree of freedom at  $s=.05$  is 3.84 and for  $s=.10$  it is 2.7. Thus, if the value of chi square for any cell is greater than 3.84 there is a difference at  $s=.10$ . I take the later as a reasonable guess at significant difference in this case. For 4 degrees of freedom, the whole matrix, the critical value of chi square at  $s=.05$  is 9.48, and since all totals are higher than that, we can assert that there was a difference in the frequencies of kinds of transactions for land and other goods between the early and late periods, and that there were differences in the frequencies of each kind of transaction within each period, both early and late.

A cell by cell examination suggests that in land transactions force was used more later than earlier, and that inheritance was less important later than earlier. Things other than land were purchased significantly less frequently later than earlier. Comparing kinds of transactions we see that in both periods inheritance was more important for land than for other things and that land changed hands significantly less than other things as gifts. During the later period land was less often involved in legal awards than in the earlier period, and land was purchased more than other things.

This pattern is consistent with the qualitative picture I have drawn--force replaces inheritance in land transfers. Land enters less into legal awards in the later period as it is more valued than before. Land is purchased more than other things in the later period because some land was purchased while in the

main movable things were pillaged or stolen, as the finding that movable things were purchased less later than earlier indicates.

This exercise reinforces the notion of increasing levels of violence and decreasing security during the Sturlung period. Both factors, increasing violence and decreasing security, different sides of the same coin, were results of the drive to expand land holdings, and both reinforce the institution of chieftaincy through competition until the surviving chieftains are more powerful and more voracious, and the need and thirst for luxury consumption goods increased in pace, as we would expect.

The problem was that at just this time Norwegian traders found the trip to Iceland increasingly profitless (Gelsinger 1981). There was no market economy in Iceland (Miller 1986). The exchange values of goods against one another and standard exchange values were negotiated at quarter assemblies for each quarter and at the Alþing for the entire island (Gelsinger 1981:35-44).

Contemporary and family sagas relate that travelers were lost at sea, captured into slavery, disappeared in foreign lands, or lost their wares while traveling, but they do not record that anyone lost a fortune by trading. In societies in which the market is the mechanism for accumulating wealth, trading is a risky venture, and there are stories of both great gains and losses at trading.

The great losses of fortune recorded in the sagas are social losses, losses incurred by inattention to maintaining a sufficiently strong following, or other social miscalculation.

Hrafnkel's saga, for instance, describes how a chieftain lost his chieftaincy through inattention to his following and regained it by carefully building it anew. In Njal's saga, in chapter 117 when one man urges Flosi to kill Njal and his sons for vengeance, Flosi responds:

"I realize only too well that even though we kill Njal and his sons, they are men of such family and standing that we shall be faced with such consequences that we shall be forced to grovel at the feet of many men and beg them for help before we get clear of trouble. And you can also be sure that many who are now rich would be stripped of wealth, and some would lose their lives as well."

Wealth was accumulated and lost in social maneuver, not through trade. The Saga of Icelanders relates many incidents of people gaining wealth by marriage and force, even poetry, but not by trade. Consumption of luxury goods was one component of this social maneuver, and that depended on relations with Norway.

When they came to Iceland, Norwegian traders had to be skilled diplomats (see Sahlins 1972:303) to conduct their trade and return alive. They had to find someone to stay with, some chieftain who would support them while they were in Iceland, because they could not make a return trip until the next summer. They often fell afoul of some Icelander before they could get back to Norway.

As the exchange value of Icelandic wool fell relative to European goods, Icelanders attempted to re-define it by action of



the price-setting assemblies (Gelsinger 1981:164-175). The Norwegian traders did not honor these tables of exchange values, and there were a number of misunderstandings between Norwegian traders and Icelanders until it became dangerous for Norwegian traders to go to Iceland and more likely that they would lose rather than gain wealth. For these reasons, economic and cultural-political, they stopped coming to Iceland, and the sources of chiefly consumption goods dried up just when it was being highly emphasized by the concentrations of chiefly power in fewer hands.

Ecological processes paralleled the social-political ones. On the basis of archaeological data McGovern, Bigelow and Russell (1985) show that the land was fully in use by 1000-1100, and that pressure on pasture and woodland probably had widespread and intense impacts resulting in environmental degradation. They go on to ask why people skilled in sub-arctic farming would persist in "practices that produced neither riches nor stability for the community as a whole" (20).

They show that small and medium sized farmers were most likely to suffer losses of a bad year, and more so a second or third bad year in close succession, and to lose critical balance of resources necessary to be defined as independent households. After two or three bad years out of five, small and middle sized farms would cease to be independent, would join the ranks of wage workers, renters, or impoverished wanderers of the countryside. As the cooling of the little ice age set in such bad years were frequent and no doubt contributed the the increasing availability

of wage workers and renters and the impulse for large land holders to expand their holdings. Many potential tenants were available and the turn over rate was high. One consequence was that there was a decline in detailed meadow-by-meadow knowledge of particular places. Add to this that landowners were more involved in social and political maneuver than in farm management and we see an increasing distancing of ownership from management. As McGovern et al. say,

. . .impoverishment of smaller gothar and former freeholding thingmen would actually directly strengthen the great chieftains both economically and politically - in the short term. In the bloody turmoil of the end of the Commonwealth, short term payoffs may have been all that mattered to the leadership of the day, and the early warnings of Little Ice Age and progressive environmental degradation may have been heard only by the politically powerless (p. 30).

#### IV Conclusions

When the ceiling on the size of holdings was removed by the availability of wage-labor about 1000, large land holders began to expand their holdings. There was no state to guarantee differential access to resources, but the system of appropriation of wealth was based on concepts of property. Thus individuals had to enforce their own claims to ownership by force. As they began to expand their holdings these claims more and more frequently clashed and force was more frequently used.

As the use of force increased, so the necessity to maintain overwhelming force, and the necessity to build and maintain entourages and coalitions through the social maneuver that was facilitated by the consumption, gift, and display of imported goods. With high turn over rates of tenants and the distancing of ownership from management, local knowledge of conditions deteriorated and with it, the ecological basis of the grazing economy.

Icelanders stayed home to tend to their feuds, Norwegians began supplying exotic goods in trade for wool. When wool lost its value in Europe, the Norwegians were less welcome in Iceland, though their goods were in even more demand. Because of loss of profitability of the trade and increased dangers, Norwegians more or less stopped coming to Iceland.

In 1262 when Gízur Þorvaldsson got the chieftains to agree to cede their authority to the king of Norway, the Icelanders demanded that the Norwegians send trading ships to Iceland in return. To get the luxury goods they needed to be chieftains the chieftains had to give up being chieftains and the fundamental contradiction of stratification without a state. Unwilling to relinquish stratification, they were absorbed into a state system.

Table 1

All Transactions

type	Eyrbyggja		Viga- Glúm		Total early		Hvam Sturla		Íslendinga		Total late	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
purchase	10	18.5	1	4	11	14.6	4	20	21	12.6	25	13.4
forced	10	18.5	3	12	13	17.3	3	15	50	29.9	53	28.3
inherit	10	18.5	7	28	17	22.7	4	20	23	13.7	27	14.4
gift	12	22.2	9	36	21	28.0	3	15	35	20.9	38	20.3
award	9	16.3	4	16	13	17.3	6	30	38	22.8	44	23.5
trade	3	5.6	1	4			0	0	0	0		
total	54		25		75		20		167		187	

Table 2

Land Transactions

type	Eyrbyggja		Viga- -Glúm		Total Early		Hvam Sturla		Íslendinga		Total Late	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
purchase	4	18.2	1	8.3	5	14.7	4	57.2	15	28.9	19	32.2
forced	2	9.1	2	8.3	3	8.8	1	14.3	3	25.0	14	23.7
inherit	10	45.5	6	50.0	16	47.1	2	28.6	11	21.2	13	22.0
gift	4	18.2	1	.3	5	14.7	0	0	7	13.5	7	11.9
award	2	9.1	3	25.0	5	14.7	0	0	6	11.5	6	10.2
total	22		13		34		7		42		59	

Table 3Chi Square Values Between Early and Late

	Land	Other	All
purchase	2.52	4.37	0.05
force	2.71	0.36	8.25
inheritance	4.10	2.50	1.98
gift	0.13	2.57	1.25
award	0.33	1.12	1.04
total	9.79	10.92	12.57

critical value for chi square for one degree of freedom  
 s=.05 is 3.84  
 s=.10 2.70

Table 4Chi Square Values Between Land and Other Transactions

	Early	Late
purchase	0.0	22.47
force	2.54	0.68
inheritance	16.56	3.34
gift	3.81	3.07
award	0.24	6.53
total	21.15	36.09

critical value for chi square for one degree of freedom  
 s=.05 is 3.84  
 s=.10 2.70

## Notes

1. While the quality of translations vary, none has been done with sufficient care to preserve the details of style, structure, and usage that would be most useful for anthropological work. Dorothy Durrenberger and I (n.d.) have analysed this problem in detail elsewhere. In this essay, I quote from various translations, listed in the bibliography, but indicate in passing some of the problems with them.

2. To compute the chi square, I assume equal distribution, weighted only by the percentage of total cases. The expected value for any cell is the column percent times the row total. The values in the chi square tables are the sums of row chi squares.

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