

The Giving of Gifts in Germanic Saga

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The logic of retribution, or payback, permeates all social activity. It is the basis of everyday interactions, both positive and negative. This logic differs between individuals and, while personal approaches shape patterns of retribution, environment also plays a role; the social, cultural and religious aspects of retribution must therefore also be analysed. Those raised in a Christian household may be expected to ‘turn the other cheek’ in response to actions against them, while others may be expected to seek revenge. Herein lies the logic of retribution: it is the reasoning behind why certain choices are made when interacting with others.¹ This paper will look at logic of retribution among the Germanic peoples, as it is represented in saga literature.

Though the sagas are not historically accurate, being composed some two hundred years after the events they describe, they do give scholars and general readers an insight into pre-Christian Germanic society. While primarily based in Iceland and Scandinavia,² the moral codes described in the literature would not be out of place among Continental Germanic tribes or other warrior societies, such as that of the Celtic Britain. The majority of saga literature may have been written in a Christian Iceland, but the ethical views of their pre-Christian ancestors were still evident in thirteenth century Icelandic society. This is shown in the sagas in their examples of retributive logic. This point is affirmed by Gu_rún Nordal: ‘Even though the Bible taught forgiveness towards one’s enemies ... those Christian ideals had not begun to undermine the codes of vengeance in thirteenth century Iceland’.³ For this reason, some events examined in this paper take place after the conversion of Iceland of 1000 CE.

¹ G W Trompf, *Early Christian Historiography: Narratives of Retributive Justice* (London, 2000) 3-4.

² *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, trans Jesse L Byock (London, 1990).

³ Gu_rún Nordal, *Ethics and Action in Thirteenth-Century Iceland* (Odense, 1998) 46-7.

On a Panegyric Note

The most common form of retribution in the sagas is of a negative kind: revenge. Retribution may occur for a number of reasons, the most common being a response to the murder of kin or the causing of dishonour. Positive retribution is also found in saga literature, in friendships, in particular, but also in the religious activity of sacrifice. The poem *Havamal*, found in the *Poetic Edda* codex, gives a good basic summary of the retributive logic of the Germanic people when dealing with friend and foe:

With his friend a man should be friends ever,
and pay back gift for gift;
laughter for laughter he learn to give,
and eke for lesing for lies.

With his friend a man should be friends ever,
with him and the friend of his friend;
but foeman's friend befriend thou never,
(and keep thee aloof from his kin).

If friend thou hast whom faithful thou deemest,
and wishest to win him for thee:
open thy heart to him nor withhold thy gifts,
and fare to find him often.

If another there be whom ill thou trustest,
yet would'st get from him gain:
speak fair to him though false though meanests,
and pay him lesing for lies.

And eke this head: if ill thou trust one,
and hollow-hearted his speech:
thou shalt laugh with him and lure him on,
and let him have tit for tat.⁴

In order to understand Germanic cosmology, it is necessary to analyse concepts of retribution. This is especially apparent in relation to concepts of time: in relation to questions of how fate and destiny affect one's actions and their outcomes, and questions concerning the role of genealogy and family. Religion must also be examined in this light, especially ideas concerning a final retribution in the afterlife or

⁴ *The Poetic Edda*, trans Lee M Hollander (Austin, 1996) 20-1.

postmortem judgement. Such ideas are found in many societies and religions, and they feature prominently in Christianity.⁵ Christianity promotes a set creed for life, which includes the concept of ‘turning the other cheek’: wrongs done that are not avenged will be paid back later in the afterlife. Retribution does not occur in this life but in the next, where one is rewarded or punished for one’s deeds.

In the saga literature, the concepts of time and fate (*wyrd*) are intertwined and differ from the classical model of past, present and future. In Greek and Roman mythology, three female figures preside over the fates of men. Among the Germanic people they were known as the *Nornir*: Urth, Verthandi and Skuld. They record and rule over the destinies of humans, but are also linked with time, and so it is through them that the Germanic concept of time will be explained. In the Germanic world, time functions dually. Thus the names of the first two *Nornir*, who look over what is seemingly past and present, stem from the same word: *ver_a* (to turn or become). The Norn of the future, Skuld, derives her name from *skula* (necessity).⁶ The Norns define what we normally think of as the total range of action: Urth reflects actions made manifest, brought to a full, clear, observable, fruition; they have ‘become’, they are accomplished. Verthandi clearly reflects the actual process of occurrence of all that Urth eventually expresses. The two Norns are closely linked, the influence of Verthandi flowing directly to Urth. As action passes from Verthandi to Urth, they move from a state of ‘becoming’ to a state of having ‘become’. Skuld is involved in necessary or obligatory action and so stands slightly apart from the other two Norns. She seems to refer to actions somehow obliged or known to occur; that is, to a situation where the necessity of their ‘becoming’ is so strongly felt or clearly known that these actions present themselves as available to be incorporated into the realms of Verthandi and Urth.⁷

⁵ Trompf, *op cit*, 8-9.

⁶ Paul C Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (Amherst, 1982) 12-3.

⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

On a Panegyric Note

In this worldview, time seems to move ahead of itself. Performing the action of slaying someone, for example, will most certainly lead to another murder, as a result of the way in which time is thought to function. By killing someone, or humiliating or dishonouring them, one causes a reaction against oneself in the retaliation of the victim or the kin of the victim.⁸ This theme is found across the sagas: the characters feel that their fate is sealed by actions already come to pass, so that there is no point in trying to flee or change the outcome. So, from *Njal's Saga*: “Death will come to me no matter where I am”, said Gunnar, “if that is my fate”.⁹ Later in the same saga, after hearing of the death of his foster-son at the hands of his own sons, Njal gives the reply:

‘It’s not my old age’, said Njal, ‘as much as the fact that I know more clearly than you what will follow’.

‘What will follow?’ asked Skarphedin.

‘My death’, said Njal, ‘and that of my wife and all my sons’.¹⁰

The same logic is found in other sagas. In the *Volsunga Saga*, Gudrun states: ‘I thought I had contrived a way to prevent you from coming here. But no one can withstand his fate’.¹¹ Time moves in such a way as to seal one’s fate at the moment of making a certain judgement or taking a certain action; what becomes necessitates retaliation. The logic shows the Germanic people to be a fatalistic people. Åke V Ström explains that ‘according to Norse belief in fate each man had a certain space of life, a certain measured time to live. It seems as if sometimes not only the length of life but also the place of death were determined in advance’.¹²

⁸ It is generally men who are humiliated and dishonoured, and who take action in relation to these problems, although the insulting of women does also occur. The forms of retribution in relation to women will be examined later.

⁹ *Njal's Saga*, trans Robert Cook (London, 2001) 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 188.

¹¹ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *op cit*, 101.

¹² Åke V Ström, ‘Scandinavian Belief in Fate: A Comparison between Pre-Christian and Post-Christian Times’ in Helmer Ringgren (ed) *Fatalistic Beliefs: in Religion, Folklore, and Literature* (Stockholm, 1967) 70-1.

In relation to questions of the afterlife and the judgement of the dead, sources other than the sagas must be analysed: mainly those dealing with the mythology of the pre-Christian Germanic people, such as *The Poetic Edda* and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. These two texts provide little evidence for a place of postmortem punishment such as is found in Christianity. What evidence there is for such a place is found in Snorri's work, though it may be over-emphasised due to his Christian beliefs¹³: 'Wicked men go to Hel and on to Niflhel'.¹⁴ From this it may be inferred that Niflhel is the land of punishment. The god Baldr journeys to Hel when he is slain by his blind brother; Baldr is considered the most 'pure' of the gods and would be quite undeserving of torment after death.¹⁵ Yet a land of torment is also spoken of in *The Poetic Edda* poem, *Voluspá*:

A hall she saw, from the sun so far
on Ná Strand's shore: turn north its doors;
drops of poison drip though the louver,
its walls are clad with coiling snakes.¹⁶

Waist-deep wade there through waters swift
mainsworn men and murders,
eke those who betrayed a trusted friend's wife;
there gnaws Níthogg naked corpses,
there the Wolf rends men – wit ye know more, or how?¹⁷

The concept of postmortem punishment in Germanic religion is problematic. This poem suggests that murderers, oath-breakers and adulterers are sent to a place of torment where their bodies are devoured by the dragon-like beast Níthogg. However, murder and killings were common in Icelandic society; the threat of torment does not seem to have stopped retributive slayings. Postmortem judgement and punishment transforms retribution into an otherworldly phenomenon, but revenge and reciprocity were very much associated

¹³ Hilda Roderick Ellis, *The Road to Hel: A Study of Conception of the Dead in Old Norse Literature* (New York, 1996) 86.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans Anthony Faulkes (London, 1987) 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 48-51.

¹⁶ In the translation, Hollander has moved the second stanza quoted here to earlier in the poem. I quote them in their correct order.

¹⁷ *The Poetic Edda*, *op cit*, 7-8.

On a Panegyric Note

with this world in Germanic society. Perhaps it could be said that postmortem punishment occurs for those who have committed unavenged crimes. But it would then be easier not to avenge a murder, more rewarding were the murderer to suffer eternal torment. Pursuing such a strategy would also remove the possibility of being sentenced to such a punishment oneself at postmortem judgement. Other aspects of this worldview also need to be considered in relation to this question: murderers were often killed in battle and so, according to Germanic beliefs, would enter Valhalla.¹⁸ The available evidence about the land of torment and damnation is insufficient for an understanding of the Germanic afterlife as a place of judgement of the dead. The crimes mentioned above are deeds which are avenged in this life. It is difficult to believe that vengeance occurs both in this life and the next for the Germanics. Thus the question of postmortem judgement must be examined in the context of the logic of retribution as a whole in pre-Christian Germanic society.

As mentioned above, the most notable type of retribution in the sagas is of a negative kind: revenge. Vengeance takes place in the society when an offence arises: an insult to a person's honour or degradation of their status; the seduction of a female relative; damage to property, such as stealing; or, in the extreme, the death of a kinsman. The laws of Iceland catered for most of these problems: monetary compensation could be provided and so dispense with the need for bloodshed or further loss of life. In *Njal's Saga*, after his wife has caused the theft of food and destruction of property on Otkel's land, Gunnar travels there to smooth things over by offering to pay for the damage done: "Then I will offer", said Gunnar, "to fix the amount myself and announce it right away, and in addition promise you my friendship and pay it all at once: I will pay you double the amount of your loss".¹⁹ Otkel does not accept this compensation, however, which causes offence to Gunnar, insulting his generosity. This is an insult for which Gunnar was able to claim compensation under the law: 'I also find that you summoned me here with intent to disgrace, and for that I award myself nothing less than the value of the shed

¹⁸ Sturluson, *op cit*, 21.

¹⁹ *Njal's Saga*, *op cit*, 84.

and the contents that were burned'.²⁰ Yet the offence caused is not major, being based more on pride and principle than anything substantial. As such, the issue can be settled with money.

If Otkel and his kin had not made payment, however, a duel to the death would have been fought.²¹ This last part of the settlement agreement shows the importance of the matter. Had the insult been greater and the history of animosity between the two men longer, greater action may have been taken against the offender, as other sagas show. In another encounter between Gunnar and Otkel where, through accident and misfortune, Gunnar receives a cut to the face and is slandered by one of Otkel's retainers, previous experience with Otkel ensures that the retribution takes a bloody turn.²² Although the situation does not culminate in a feud between Gunnar's family and the remaining kin of Otkel, such is not always the case.

In the *Eyrbyggja Saga*, a feud erupts between two prominent families of the southern Breida Fjord area of Iceland after an attempted desecration of a holy area:

One spring at the Thor's Ness Assembly, Thorgrim Kjallaksson and his brother-in-law Asgeir of Eyr declared publicly that they would no longer tolerate the arrogance of the Thorsnessings and meant to ease themselves there on the grass just as they would at any other meeting, even though the Thorsnessings, so full of their own importance, thought their own land more sacred than any other in Breidafjord. The Kjalleklings let it be known they were planning to waste no more shoe-leather on trips to any off-shore skerry whenever they felt the demands of nature.²³

This offence leads to the slaying of some of the Kjalleklings and, while the matter is settled in court, the underlying tensions between the two families remain.²⁴ The tension extends to kin by marriage when the Thorsnessings and Kjalleklings become involved in a situation that does not initially relate to them: Thorbjorn, brother-in-

²⁰ *Ibid*, 89.

²¹ *Ibid*, 89.

²² *Ibid*, 91-3.

²³ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, trans Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London, 1989) 34.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 35-7.

On a Panegyric Note

law of Snorri of the Thornessings, is killed by Thorarin, kin of Vermund of the Kjalleklings.²⁵ The events that follow show the bonds between kin, both by blood and by law, and show the way in which unrelated slayings and insults become attached to pre-existing feuds between families. In this feud, monetary compensation is initially made, rather than the slaying of the offenders, but this changes when the feud shifts direction and comes to concern Snorri the Priest, a Thornessing, and Arnkel the Priest, distantly related to the Kjalleklings by marriage. As in the initial incident, the problem arises in the context of a feud between Snorri's ancestors and the Kjalleklings. The tension between Snorri and Arnkel is due their being the two most prominent men in the district and, as such, those who are called on for support in legal cases. Arnkel is called upon for support in the case against Snorri's family in the Thorbjorn-Thorarin affair and again later, in the case against Snorri himself for the killing of Vigfus, who had planned an attempt on Snorri's life.²⁶ Throughout this saga, there are numerous slayings on both sides. They do not occur in a chain, as in other sagas, but rather reveal constant animosity between the two families, which is only resolved with the slaying of Arnkel, who leaves no male heirs to take up the cause of the killing.²⁷

Here the importance of kin in retributive logic can be seen. It is they who take action over a slaying or rectify an insult. It is primarily male kin who are concerned, as is shown quite clearly in the *Volsunga Saga*, where each generation of the Volsungs must face the challenge of avenging their father. It is only through this act that they can truly be seen as men: 'Soon afterward he and Regin met, and Regin said: "Kill Fafnir, as you have promised". Sigurd answered: "I shall do that, but first I must do something else: avenge King Sigmund and my other relatives who fell in that battle"'.²⁸ Before Sigurd can slay the dragon Fafnir, he must avenge his father since, in Germanic culture, he cannot be seen as a warrior if he has no regard for the

²⁵ *Ibid*, 49-54.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 72-6.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 98-102.

²⁸ *The Saga of the Volsungs*, *op cit*, 60.

killing of his father, King Sigmund, and lets it go without retribution. In the *Volsunga Saga*, these retributive cycles are clearly seen, and certain related themes recur, such as problems to do with in-laws.

An exception to this cyclical pattern is the death of Sigmund, which is caused by the insult of Hjordis's choice of Sigmund over another suitor.²⁹ In this example, we see the need to avenge an insult, which features prominently in the Icelandic sagas. With their lack of resources and inability to support a lavish lifestyle, the Icelanders placed great weight on honour and status rather than wealth; most homesteads were of roughly equivalent value.³⁰ Many of the events of the sagas show insults to a man's honour, which must then be restored. This is why payback is so important: status is highly regarded. To gain status, one needs to maintain honour, which is bound up with retribution in pre-Christian Germanic culture. One also needs to take care for one's retainers and friends; one will not be sought by the Al-Thing (the Icelandic Parliament) for example if one disregards the bonds between kith and kin.

The importance of avenging the death of kin is found in *Egil's Saga* where, as an old man, Egil loses his son at sea, a death he cannot avenge. The inability to avenge his son increases his pain and sorrow over his loss.

Could my sword stroke take
Vengeance on the sea-surge,
Bitter ale brewer
None can bend or break,
Could my hand kill
The crushing wave,
With god and goddess
I should grapple.

But I've no strength to subdue
The slayer of my son
Nor the boldness beat
Down my boy's killer:

²⁹ *Ibid*, 52-3.

³⁰ Jesse L Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Berkeley, 1982) 78.

On a Panegyric Note

Obvious to all,
An old man, unaided,
Helpless, unhappy,
Can hold out no hope.³¹

For the most part, it is men who must take retributive action, but this does not stop women from having a role in these processes of retribution. It is often in the form of insult that women are caused harm. The ways they avenge these insults is far more varied than that of the men. In *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, Queen Hvit makes advances towards Bjorn, the king's son. The retribution she takes for his rejection of her is extreme: 'And it seems that you, Bjorn, think it preferable to embrace a commoner's daughter. You deserve a punishment, something far more disgraceful than enjoyment of my love and tenderness. It would not come as a surprise if something should happen to make you suffer for your stubbornness and your stupidity'. She strikes him with her wolf skin gloves, telling him to become a cave bear, grim and savage: 'You will eat no food other than your own father's livestock and, in feeding yourself, you will kill more than has ever been observed before. You will never be released from the spell, and your awareness of this disgrace will be more dreadful to you than no remembrance at all'.³² She cannot take this matter to another, for she is betraying her husband. Despite this, she feels wronged for Bjorn's refusal of her advances and his punishment of her, and so deals out her own: so she resorts to an act that is abhorred by society. Through the use of witchcraft, Hvit seeks retribution for being spurned. As in the *Havamal*,³³ she is giving gift for gift.

In the *Laxdæla Saga*, we find an example of a woman taking action to slay a man who has offended her. This woman had been divorced by her husband for wearing men's clothing, something looked down upon by society.³⁴ The divorce itself is instigated by another woman

³¹ *Egil's Saga*, trans Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London, 1976) 206.

³² *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*, trans Jesse L Byock (London, 1998) 36-7.

³³ See quotation above.

³⁴ Carol J Clover, 'Regardless of Sex: Men, Women, and Power in Early Northern Europe', *Speculum* 68, 1993, 371-2.

who wishes to marry the husband: another blow to the woman's honour. 'She went into the bed closet; Thord lay on his back, sound asleep. She woke him up, and he turned on his side when he saw that another man had come in; Aud drew a short-sword and lunged at him with it, wounding him severely; the sword caught his right arm and gashed him across both nipples'.³⁵ No compensation is made or even sought for this injury. This is not too hard to believe, since it would require Thord to admit to being attacked by a woman. Even were compensation won, it would not give Thord honour since, having been wounded by a woman, doubt would be cast on his manhood and on his ability as a warrior.³⁶

Women, it seems, have their own forms of vengeance. Often, the need for retribution stems from the same reasons as for men but, due to the fact that they are unable to take direct action for the insults levelled against them, they provoke other men to take up the struggle for them.³⁷ These four quotations demonstrate that, in these sagas, women do what they can to spur men into action for the death of kinsmen or for insults against them:

'First you must carry it yourself and avenge your father', she said, 'because the halberd is announcing death, for one man or more'.³⁸

'Here's a head', she said, 'that would never have shirked action if you'd been killed and its help had been needed'.³⁹

Gudrun said, 'You would have had just the right temper if you had been peasants' daughters – you do nothing about anything, whether good or bad. Despite all the disgrace and dishonour Kjartan has done to you, you lose on sleep over it even when he rides past your door with only a single companion. Men like you have the memory of hogs. It is obviously futile to hope that you will ever dare attack Kjartan at home if you haven't the nerve to face him now when he is travelling with only one or two companions.

³⁵ *Laxdæla Saga*, trans Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson (London, 1969) 128.

³⁶ Clover, *op cit*, 364-5.

³⁷ Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia, 1996) 174-203.

³⁸ *Njal's Saga*, *op cit*, 131.

³⁹ *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *op cit*, 75.

On a Panegyric Note

You sit at home pretending to be men, and there are always too many of you about'.⁴⁰

Hildigunn placed the cloak on Flosi's shoulder; the dried blood poured down all over him. Then she spoke: 'This cloak, Flosi, was your gift to Hoskuld, and now I give it back to you. He was slain in it. In the name of God and all good men I charge you, by all the powers of your Christ and by your courage and manliness, to avenge all the wounds which he received in dying – or else be an object of contempt to all men'.⁴¹

Women feel the need to avenge the dishonour done to themselves and their kin, since it reflects also on them and not just the menfolk: 'In their cases revenge means not only restitution of honour but also economic survival though fines and other payments'.⁴² However, women do not always have the means to avenge death and insults themselves, and so instead, choose an avenger to perform these actions for them.⁴³ In some cases, as seen above, women use words to bring about retribution: 'In the feud situation, women's (and old men's) words are the equivalent of men's deeds; it is as incumbent on a woman to urge vengeance as it is incumbent on a man to take it'.⁴⁴ This, again, reflects the fact that honour and status were very important in Icelandic society: 'In those days Mord Valgardsson lived at Hof in Rangarvellir. He was well off for property but was not well liked'.⁴⁵ Differences in honour could result in differences in a dispute at the Al-Thing.

These are matters only of the human involvement in negative retribution, but the role of the gods in human affairs must also be analysed. As has been mentioned, there is little to suggest that there is payback in the afterlife. This may be due to the lack of a dogmatic code which people are expected to live by, but also the fact there is no real duality within the Germanic world. There is no concept of

⁴⁰ *Laxdæla Saga*, *op cit*, 172.

⁴¹ *Njal's Saga*, *op cit*, 195.

⁴² Jochens, *op cit*, 202.

⁴³ Clover, *op cit*, 368.

⁴⁴ Carol J Clover, 'Hildigunnr's Lament' in Sarah M Anderson with Karen Swenson (eds) *Cold Counsel: Women in Old Norse Literature and Mythology* (New York, 2002) 17.

⁴⁵ *Njal's Saga*, *op cit*, 79.

absolute good and evil or similarly conflicting forces. However there is one instance related in the sagas that deals with punishment after death. In *Njal's Saga*, a man called Killer-Hrapp desecrates the temple belonging to Earl Hakon, stealing from the statues of the gods and burning the building: "This was not done by the gods", said the earl. "A man must have burned the temple and carried the gods out. The gods are in no hurry to avenge themselves, but the man who did this will be banished from Valhalla and never enter there".⁴⁶ This example shows some concept of punishment after death by the gods; it is a situation where vengeance, not occurring in this world, may occur in the next.

On another occasion the gods are told to be causing problems for the kingdom of Norway after King Olaf converts to Christianity: 'In the autumn the weather worsened, with severe frost and cold. The pagans said it was no wonder that the weather was misbehaving: "It's all because of the king's innovations and this new faith of his that the gods are angry"'.⁴⁷ Here the gods bring about retribution – or rather, the people feel they do – for being dishonoured by the conversion to the new faith. Such ideas are found in other societies, as Trompf notes: 'Certainly the need for rulers to be on the side of the gods was all-important'.⁴⁸ The ruler, it is thought, is no longer on side with the gods and the result is that the country is punished. It appears that retribution does extend to the gods in Germanic culture.

Throughout the sagas, there are also examples of positive retribution: men hold great feasts and give gifts so as to create bonds between themselves and other men and their kin. The principles of retribution are very much along the same lines as those evident in actions of vengeance: retribution is performed so as to build honour and status in the community. The benefits of positive retribution may be even greater than those of negative: by holding a banquet and honouring the guests with presents, one essentially places the recipient in debt to the giver and, as is evident in the *Havamal*, debt and gifts must be

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 145.

⁴⁷ *Laxdæla Saga*, *op cit*, 145.

⁴⁸ Trompf, *op cit*, 11.

On a Panegyric Note

repaid: ‘Hoskuld lived for a long time at Ossabaer, and he and the Njalssons added to each other’s prestige, and they went with him on his journeys. So fervent was their friendship that they invited each other to a feast every autumn and exchanged generous gifts’.⁴⁹ This type of relationship is found throughout the sagas: strong bonds are built up between families through reciprocity.

Another religious aspect of retribution is also found in this context: sacrifice. Sacrifice held an important place in Germanic religion and, like the other forms of retribution, it involved giving gift for gift. By sacrificing to the gods, a debt is created that needs to be rectified, so that, as a result of the gift, the gods would intervene in the human world. When Thangbrand journeys to Iceland to missionise to the people there, he faced some opposition from the pagans:

There was a man called Hedin the Sorcerer, who lived at Kerlingardal. The heathens there paid him to put Thangbrand and his companions to death, and he went up to Arnarstakk heath and performed a great sacrifice there. Then, when Thangbrand was riding from the east, the earth split open under his horse; he leaped off the horse and climbed up to the rim of the chasm, but the earth swallowed up his horse with all its gear, and they never saw it again. Then Thangbrand gave praise to God.⁵⁰

Despite the sacrifice and the gods repaying of that gift, they are unable to kill Thangbrand; the point is essentially that the Christian god is mightier than the pagan. There is also a reference in the historical accounts of Ibn Fadlan to sacrifice. Ibn Fadlan journeyed among the Rus traders, who originated in Scandinavia. On these travels he observes one of the Rus merchants:

So he goes up to the big figure, flings himself on the ground, and says: ‘O my lord, I have come from far off with so many slave-girls and so many sable furs’, (here he counts up all the wares he has brought) ‘and now I come to you with this offering’. (Here he lays what he has brought in front of the wooden post.) ‘I wish that you would send me a merchant rich in dinars and dirhems, who will buy from me as I wish, and will not argue with what I say’.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Njal's Saga*, *op cit*, 167.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 174-5.

⁵¹ Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Some Scandinavian Sacrifices’, *Folklore* 78, 1967, 191.

Other sacrifices are mentioned in the sagas, though without detailing the reasons for the gift. When Hrafnkel settles at Adalbol, he has a large temple built and gives great sacrifices to the gods. He loves Frey above all the other gods and so gives him a half-share in his best treasures.⁵² The reason for the sacrifice is not given, but it can be assumed that it relates to concepts of cosmic order and the maintenance of balance. This idea is taken up by Clunies Ross, in relation to sacrifice in Norse myth: ‘the idea of sacrifice is associated with the desire to institute and maintain social and cosmic order. Hence sacrificial acts are often designed to repair breaches of order or to prevent threats of disorder’.⁵³ Clunies Ross’ point concerns the sacrifices the gods make, but the sacrifices made by the gods are reflected in human society. While the reasons for the human sacrifice are not as extreme as those of the gods, sacrifice works to maintain long-term good of the society: to maintain the fertility of the land, good weather and other threats to the existence of a relatively peaceful society. The gods are given gifts to maintain a balance that will result in a peaceful livelihood: ‘Towards winter, sacrifice should be made for a good season, and at mid-winter for good growth: the third, when summer came, that was a victory’.⁵⁴ In Germanic society, concepts of gift giving are interwoven with those of retribution.

In the saga literature, the concept of retribution works both negatively and positively: the insults and death one brings to another will most certainly be returned, and in the same manner one can count on invitations in return for the banquet one holds for friends. In Germanic society both revenge and reciprocity stem from the desire for the maintenance of honour and status, but relate also to the desire for maintenance of the social order, especially in a religious context. Along with religion, concepts of fate and time are entwined with retribution. These concepts are invoked from the moment a dishonourable deed is done. It rests on one’s kin to help in matters of

⁵² *Hrafnkel’s Saga: and other Icelandic Stories*, trans Hermann Pálsson (London, 1970) 36.

⁵³ Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse Myths in Medieval Northern Society*, Vol 1 (Odense, 1994) 190.

⁵⁴ Jón Hnefill A_ alsteinsson, ‘Blót and _ing: The Function of the Tenth Century go_i’, *Temenos* 21, 1985, 27.

On a Panegyric Note

retribution; one seeks the support of kin in all matters concerning both revenge and reciprocity. Retributive logic is thus very much a this-worldly concern. It is unlikely that the Germanics believed in an afterlife of torment and punishment, despite references to it in the mythic literature which results from Christian influences.⁵⁵ Like the sagas, the *Havamal* provides an extraordinary insight into the mentality and ethics of the Germanic people. It summarises in the simplest terms the logic behind Germanic retribution: ‘A gift should be repaid with a like one’.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Thomas A DuBois, *Nordic Religions in the Viking Age* (Philadelphia, 1999) 81.

⁵⁶ *The Poetic Edda*, trans Carolyne Larrington (Oxford, 1996) 20.