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The social weight of silver in the Íslendingasögur and the Viking Age hoards

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SMALL THINGS WIDE HORIZONS

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF
BIRGITTA HÅRDH

Edited by

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Bertil Helgesson and Bengt Söderberg**

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Preface

The 16th of August 2015 is Professor Birgitta Hårdh's 70th birthday. At the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History in Lund, an editorial group was set up for the publication of a Festschrift in her honour.

For several decades Birgitta has been an important staff member and researcher at the Department. Her doctoral dissertation was based on Viking Age silver deposits in southernmost Sweden. This is a field that she later developed in several national and international publications. As a result she is regarded as one of the leading experts on the Northern European Viking Age, engaged in diverse research projects both in Sweden and internationally, and she is a vital collaborator in various networks specializing in the Viking Age.

Through time, Birgitta has extended her research to comprise other periods in the Iron Age. This is particularly clear in her research on the major site of Uppåkra outside Lund. Here she has devoted articles to a detailed treatment of the finds from the Late Iron Age. She has also edited several of the volumes in the series Uppåkrastudier, with both national and international contributions.

Another special field examined by Birgitta Hårdh is the megalithic graves in south-west Scania. Both find material from individual sites and broader perspectives on the Middle Neolithic have been covered in these studies.

Besides doing research, Birgitta Hårdh has for several decades been a lecturer and professor, with long experience of teaching students and supervising doctoral candidates in the subject. She has also been director of studies and served on a number of committees in the Faculty of Arts and Theology.

A feature common to all Birgitta Hårdh's research is that she has been able, through analysis of a body of finds, to broaden the perspective, not least geographically through her profound knowledge of phenomena in Northern Europe and indeed all of Europe. This book has been given the title *Small Things – Wide Horizons*, which is a good summary of Birgitta's research hitherto.

Thanks to the large network of contacts to which Birgitta Hårdh belongs, the call for papers for this Festschrift met a great response. A total of fourty titles were submitted to the proposed volume.

Through this Festschrift we wish to thank and honour Professor Birgitta Hårdh as a fine colleague and an excellent scholar. We all look forward to coming years and many more important contributions to archaeological research.

*Lars Larsson, Fredrik Ekengren,
Bertil Helgesson, Bengt Söderberg*



BIRGITTA HÅRDH

The social weight of silver in the Íslendingasögur and the Viking Age hoards

Fredrik Ekengren & Maria Domeij Lundborg

Abstract

This study suggests a predominantly socially-strategic function of the silver found in Viking Age hoards, more specifically, connected to the realm of customary law and the blood feud as a social institution. This suggestion is based on a quantitative and contextual analysis of the Íslendingasögur, and a comparison between the function of silver in the sagas and the composition and context of the hoards.

Introduction

The function and meaning of silver has always been a central issue in the study of Viking Age Scandinavia. The social and economic need for this metal has been suggested as one of the main driving forces behind the Scandinavian expansion in the 9–11th century. The resulting plunder, trade, hoards and jewelry have moreover helped to ingrain the evocative and powerful image of *The Vikings* in the scholarly as well as popular mind-set. Besides being viewed as an important raw material, Viking Age silver is predominantly interpreted from an economic perspective. Its presence in the archaeological record, particularly in the form of coins and hack silver, is seen as evidence for its function as money on a goods or services market, in private entrepreneurship and private ownership, a view based on a number of assumptions: in part, on a tendency to equate the internal (Scandinavian) function of the silver with its acquisition through external trade, and further, that since silver was acquired through external trade, it must also have functioned in a trade context within local society. This idea is often maintained to the detriment of examining the internal sociocultural dynamics that may have conditioned the practice of depositing silver. Another reason is the somewhat uncritical association between a regulated weight system and trade. The fact that large amounts of silver was taken out of circulation and deposited in hoards, like those found on Gotland, has consequently baffled scholars. Take the famous hoard from Spillings on Gotland as a striking example (Fig. 1). Discovered on the Spillings farm in Othem parish in 1999, it is the largest known Viking Age hoard in the world. It consists of two deposits found 3 m from each other. It contained over 14,300 silver coins (c. 17 kg.), 486 arm rings, 25 finger rings, c. 80 bars, and spiral rings and cut silver. Some of the silver appears to have been stored in sacks of fabric, pelt or hide, while other pieces appear to have been stored



FIG. 1. PARTS OF THE SPILLINGS HOARD ON GOTLAND. OPEN AND SPIRAL ARM RINGS HAVE BEEN LINKED TOGETHER INTO LARGER UNITS. PHOTO BY GÖRAN STRÖM, THE GOTLAND MUSEUM.

in a smaller wooden chest or box. It had a combined weight of c. 67 kg, of which one deposit weighed 27 kg and the other, 40 kg. It is, however, regarded as one hoard, dated post-870/71 (Östergren 2008; 2011).

The sheer amount of silver that remained in the ground at Spillings and in other Scandinavian hoards indicates a not so uncomplicated relationship between people and silver. Although silver, particularly the coins and hack silver, is understandably easy to associate with a capitalistic market economy, there is a growing criticism against this one-dimensional perspective. In her seminal work on *Silver in the Viking Age* (1996), Birgitta Hårdh argued for a complex interplay of various economic systems. She

stated that we cannot separate the economic, social and religious spheres in this period, and “[---] that transactions could be carried out in different ways and with varying social consequences” (Hårdh 1996, 165). This point has been further emphasized by later scholars, who all point to the socially embedded and entangled practices of using silver for display, gifts, payment and deposition; they argue for the possible co-existence of and intersection between various systems of exchange, elaborating with more nuanced concepts such as *commodity-money* and *special-purpose money* (e.g., Domeij 2001; Gustin 2004, 40 ff.; Gaimster 2007, 126 f.; Williams 2007, 181 ff.; Graham-Campbell 2011, 33; Sindbæk 2011, 41 f.; Skre 2011, 67 f.).

The Íslendingasögur as analogy

In this chapter we wish to contribute to this move beyond the mere market economic perspective and problematize the ideological and social function of Viking Age silver by using written sources as an explanatory comparison.¹ We base our study on a quantitative and contextual analysis of the 40 *Íslendingasögur* (*Sagas of Icelanders*),² excluding the 49 shorter *Íslendingaþættir* (*Tales of Icelanders*), fully aware of the lively debate concerning their historicity. While the sagas recount events taking place on Iceland in the tenth and eleventh centuries, they were written down during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, and there has been a long scholarly tradition of regarding them as literary fiction, as stories composed in written form (Andersson 1964; Byock 1984; see Firth 2012, 144 ff.). Since the 1980’s, however, support has grown for the position that the sagas contain a core of orally transmitted historical information that was adapted, embellished and compiled into the written form. This view argues that the authors of the sagas relied on social memories to tell stories about the Viking Age, but in the process of writing, reordered these into single stories and customized them to the context in which they were being penned (e.g., Sigurðsson 1999, 24 ff.; Byock 2001, 143 ff.; Callow 2006, 303; Firth 2012, 147). For the present study, the *Íslendingasögur* are thus used as

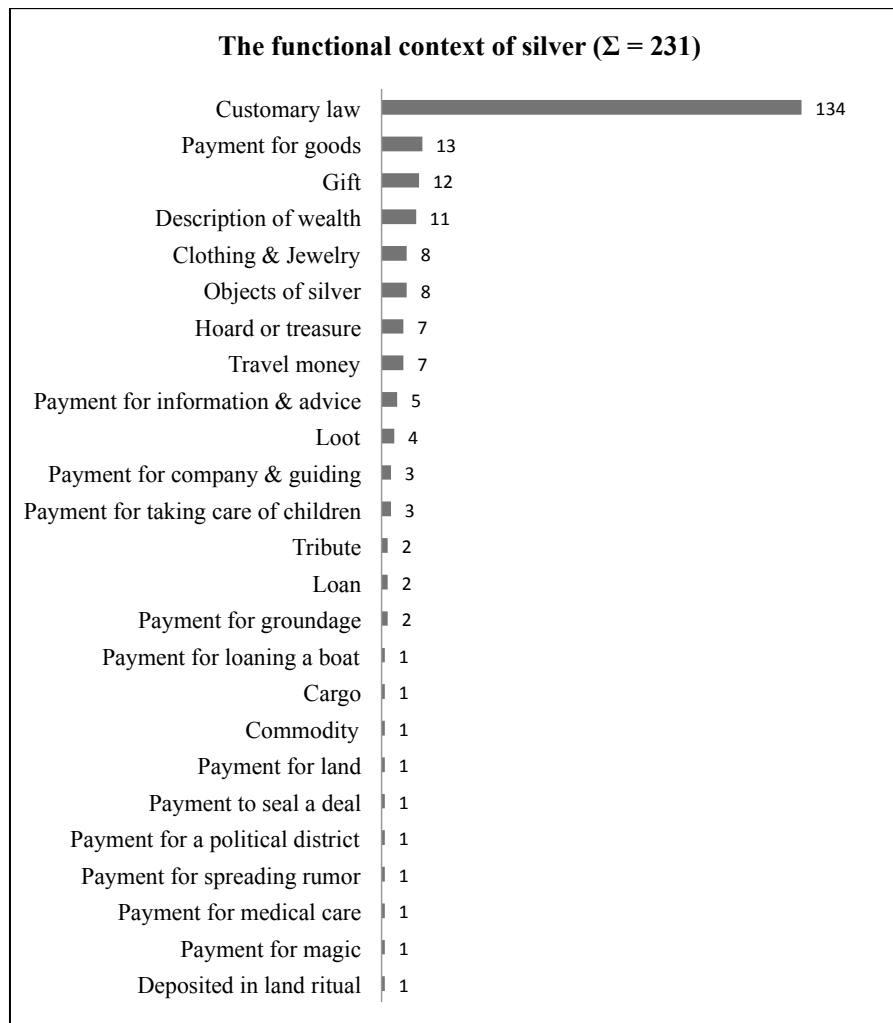
a source that may give us, if not an accurate account of historic events, analogical insights into norms and social practices involving silver in Viking Age society. By using the translations in Hreinsson *et al.* 1997 and the Icelandic editions published in Halldórsson *et al.* 1998, we have registered each instance in the original texts in which the Icelandic word for silver (*silfr*) is mentioned, or where it is clear through context that silver is implied. We have then used both the Icelandic and English editions in order to identify patterns in the interaction between people and silver, focusing on the silver’s *physical form*, its *intended function* (e.g. as money, clothing, jewelry, weapons, etc.), its *actual social function* (such as payment, settlement, gift, treasure, or display), and lastly the *spatial context* where it was used. By following the metal in this fashion, we believe we are able to trace its social biography.

Silver in the sagas

Silver (*silfr*) as a metal is mentioned in 34 of the 40 sagas. While the word is used in a few cases as an adjective to describe clothing, jewelry or other objects decorated with the metal, it is quite clear that of the 231 observed instances where silver is mentioned in the texts, the majority refer to it as a means of payment. But silver was far from the only valid form of payment: rather, it was part of a complicated system of interchangeable value, involving homespun, livestock and other forms of commodity money (Gullbekk 2011). This is one of the reasons why one cannot interpret every reference to money or financial transactions in the sagas as a reference to silver. While it is likely that silver was included in the more general references to money, the Old Icelandic word *fé*, usually translated as *money* in the English editions, should in many cases be regarded as a reference to *money substances*. These would include property, livestock, homespun, and other assets, as well as silver (Miller 1986, 37 n. 73; see *Drop.* 8; *Eg.* 75). When the *form* of the silver is specified, however, we appear to be dealing primarily with bullion in the form of coins, jewelry and hack silver (e.g., *Band.* 10). This silver was stored in various ways: it was hidden as hoards in the landscape (e.g., *Drop.* 1; *Eg.* 88; *Njála* 30), kept in chest, boxes or specific storage rooms in the house (e.g., *Eg.* 46, 55, 58; *Eir.* 5; *Vatnsd.* 28; *Vopnf.* 4), or, as is most often the case, carried on the person in purses or bags (e.g., *Band.* 6–9; *Eyrb.* 14; *Finnb.* 13; *Flóam.* 19; *Fóstbr.* 5; *Gísl.* 16; *Laxd.* 12). This bullion nature of the silver is also evident in the more detailed descriptions of silver transactions, where the silver is poured out of its container, appraised for its quality, counted and weighed (e.g., *Eyrb.* 14; *Fóstbr.* 5; *Gísl.* 16; *Laxd.* 12, 67; *Njála* 123; *Svarfd.* 11; see Dennis *et al.* 1980, 141, 248; 2000, 214). Here, the sagas thus corroborate the archaeological finds where we, besides the presence of weights and scales, see evidence of the quality of the metal being tested through pecking and nicking. But if we look closer at the transactions themselves, the functional context of the silver appears to be somewhat removed from regular trade. When goods were bought and sold, the people of

¹ This study is part of an ongoing project about *the social weight of silver* in Viking Age Scandinavia, conducted by the authors at Lund University.

² These are *Bandamanna saga* (*Band.*); *Bárðar saga snæfellsáss* (*Bárth.*); *Bjarnar saga Hítðalakappa* (*Bjarn.*); *Brennu-Njáls saga* (*Njála*); *Droplugarsona saga* (*Drop.*); *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (*Eg.*); *Eiríks saga rauða* (*Eir.*); *Eyrbyggja saga* (*Eyrb.*); *Finnboga saga ramma* (*Finnb.*); *Flóamanna saga* (*Flóam.*); *Fljótsdæla saga* (*Fljót.*); *Fóstbræðra saga* (*Fóstbr.*); *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (*Gísl.*); *Grænlandinga saga* (*Grænl.*); *Grettis saga* (*Grett.*); *Gull-Þóris saga* [a.k.a. *Þorskfirðinga saga*] (*Gullth.*); *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* (*Gunn.*); *Gunnlaugs saga orrmstungu* (*Gunnl.*); *Hænsa-Þóris saga* (*Hæns.*); *Hallfreðar saga vandræðaskálds* (*Hallfr.*); *Harðar saga og Hólmverja* (*Hardh.*); *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* (*Háv.*); *Heiðarvíga saga* (*Heidh.*); *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (*Hrafnk.*); *Kjalnesinga saga* (*Kjaln.*); *Kormáks saga* (*Krom.*); *Kröka-Refs saga* (*Krók.*); *Laxdæla saga* (*Laxd.*); *Ljósvetninga saga* (*Ljósv.*); *Ölkofra saga* (*Ölk.*); *Reykðæla saga og Víga-Skútu* (*Reykd.*); *Svarfdæla saga* (*Svarfd.*); *Þórðar saga hreðu* (*Thórdh.*); *Þorsteins saga hvíta* (*Thorst.*); *Þorsteins saga Síðu-Hallssonar* (*Thorst. Sidh.*); *Valla-Ljóts saga* (*Vall.*); *Vatnsdæla saga* (*Vatnsd.*); *Víga-Glúms saga* (*Glúma*); *Víglundar saga* (*Vígl.*); *Vopnfirðinga saga* (*Vopnf.*).

FIG. 2. THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF SILVER IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*.

the sagas seem to have preferred to use barter and other commodities as payment, rather than silver (Gullbekk 2011, 186). The relative majority of silver, on the other hand, was used in transactions in the realm of customary law: i.e., in highly inalienable and socially regulated modes of exchange characterized by a great deal of political complexity (Fig. 2). Of the 231 instances where silver is referred to in the sagas, 134 relate directly or indirectly to legal transactions. These references are furthermore distributed over 28 of the 34 sagas mentioning the metal, making the judicial dimension of silver representative for the *Íslendingasögur* as a whole. Only a total of 41 instances refer to the payment for goods or services.

Customary law

In the legal system of Viking Age Iceland, without a royal power or an executive branch of government, it was the conflicting parties' own responsibility to take legal action or defend their cases in front of the assembly, the *thing*. This self-regulating system demanded an extended network of people who could support the legal case and share the social and economic responsibilities that came with the conflict. The legal norms were thus based on

case-law and were affirmed through ritualized practice in public places, or in the company of oath-takers, witnesses, moderators and advisors. Through these formalized interactions, those values and legal practices that were considered right by tradition were embodied in society (Heusler 1911; Gurevitič 1970; Byock 1982; Miller 1996; Sigurðsson 1999; Gíslason 2009; Miller 2014). In the *Íslendingasögur* it is evident that these interchanges not only transpired between people, but also between people and material culture, particularly silver.

The majority of the legal transactions involving silver in the sagas are associated with blood feuds. In this case, however, the feud was more than a quarrel. It functioned as the sanctioned regulating system through which disputes were processed and social-political competition was defined and (re)structured (Miller 1983a, 160 f.; 1984, 114 f.; see Miller 1996). Hence it involved numerous social exchanges in addition to the feud's most distinct expressions such as revenge-killings, lawsuits and *weregeld* (restitution paid to the murder victim's kin), including transactions like marriages, fosterings, gifts and inheritance (Miller 1986, 28 f. n. 45). Ian W. Miller has described this reciprocity-system as a "balance-sheet

model”: an exchange cycle in which wrongs, whether the killing, wounding or discrediting of a person, created debts that demanded repayment through compensation or blood in order to restore the honor of the kin group (Miller 1983b, 316; 2014, 74). Thus, the acts of evaluating, counting, and balancing silver, as mentioned above, are highly symbolic in the sagas, since they capture the very instances where the social equilibrium was tested and established.

The maintenance of this equilibrium was the responsibility of the kin group. Each kinsman had a duty to initiate the feud to protect the honor and integrity of the group, just as he was liable for all the actions committed by his kinsmen. The murder of a person was thus a violation of his entire kin group, and any equal member of the assailant's kin was a likely target for the revenge-killing. Furthermore, the kin would share in the payment of compensation money in order to bring closure to a particular part of the dispute, and it was the kin group as a whole who received the compensation (Miller 1983a, 162, 189 f. n. 124; 1996; 2014, 42). A large portion of the silver in the sagas was in other words collective money, not belonging to a specific member of the kin group but accrued or distributed within its ranks (e.g., *Njála* 123). Settlements and compensation payments were the socially preferred solutions for both parties in a conflict, since losing in court would usually mean outlawry for the defendant and humiliation for the plaintiff. This is the reason why kinsmen would set aside money for future arbitration awards, or transfer suits to each other within the kin group in order to reduce future monetary liabilities. However, the settlements reached between conflicting parties rarely achieved permanent peace. Usually, the feud entailed a seemingly perpetual string of killings, lawsuits, settlements, compensation payments, and violations of agreements, one event feeding into the other.

Blood and money

In chapter 123 of *Brennu-Njáls saga* there is an exchange that clearly captures the sociopolitical significance of silver. Hoskuld, the beloved foster son of Njal, had been killed by Njal's own sons. Njal's kin amassed the large amount of silver necessary to atone for the murder, and presented it to the prosecutor of Hoskuld's kin, a man named Flosi.

Hall came to Flosi and said, “Come now to the Law Council. All the money has been paid out fully and brought together in one place” (*Njála* 123).

Njal and Flosi agreed to settle the case, but Njal's son Skarphedin insulted Flosi who ended up refusing the money.

Flosi pushed the money away and said he would not take a penny of it, and that it would now be one of two things: either there would be no redress at all for Hoskuld, or they would take blood-vengeance

for him. Flosi would neither offer nor accept peace [---].

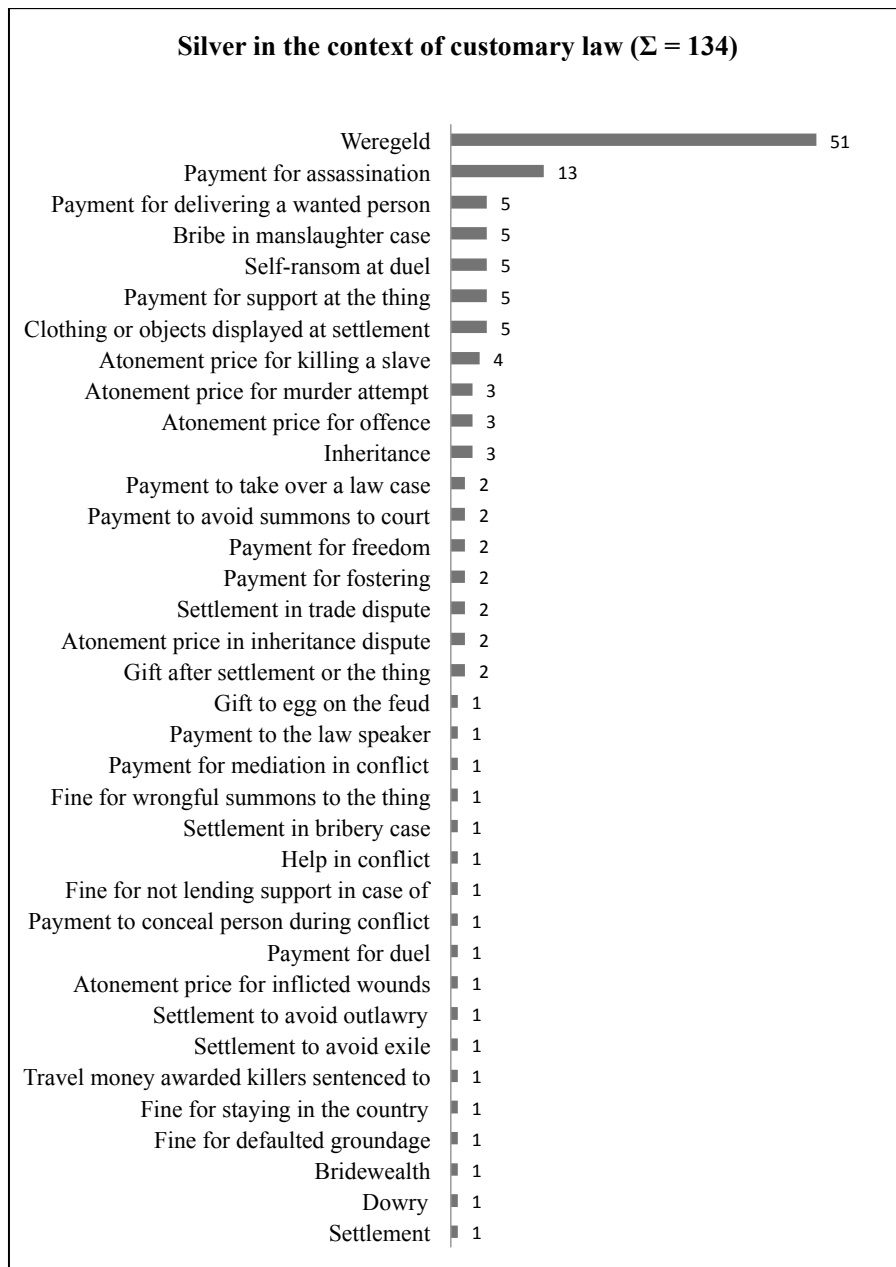
[---] The men who had contributed the money talked about taking it back. Gudmund spoke: “I do not choose to bring shame on myself by taking back what I have given, neither here nor anywhere.”

“That is well spoken,” they said. And then no one wanted to take back his money (*Njála* 123).

In this exchange we observe the reciprocity of the feud, the collective nature of silver and its role as weregeld in arbitrary settlements and negotiations at the *thing*, as well as the fact that some large sums were occasionally refused and then kept out of circulation. Of the 134 observed instances where silver is associated with customary law in the sagas, a total of 51 examples refer to transactions of weregeld (Fig. 3). This makes weregeld payments the most common form of silver transaction, which attests to the integral part of the silver in the feud. The majority of the other cases displayed in fig. 3 are also associated with the feud as social institution, since they form part of the various exchanges throughout the dispute process (Miller 1983b, 339; 1986, 28 f. n. 45; Gaskins 2005, 202).

If we look at the social space in which these legal transactions take place, the relative majority of them (57 of 134) take place at or in connection to the *thing*. This was a key site where the silver was evaluated, counted and weighed—primarily in the booths surrounding the *thing* (e.g., *Band*. 9; *Bjarn*. 34; *Njála* 36) since many of the settlements were reached through ritualized arbitration and not in court. Even when silver is mentioned outside the realm of the *thing*, we are usually dealing with legal transactions, such as when silver is mentioned in connection with farmsteads. This is not solely a reference to the place where the family silver was stored, but rather a reference to the function of the farms as important sites for negotiations. The handling of silver at the farms represented both the inhabitants' social capital and their kin group's judicial agency (e.g., *Fljót*. 12; *Gísl*. 11; see Miller 1986, 48; Gullbekk 2011, 185).

A number of transactions in fig. 3 relate to the various support-gathering processes of the feud, for instance payments and bribes to kinsmen, followers, law speakers and arbitrators in order to ensure the wanted backing and outcome at the negotiations. This was a vital part of the process since success in a case rested more on the disputants' abilities to muster support than on proof (e.g., Miller 1983a, 164; 1984, 98 f., 113). On occasion support-gathering appears to be ritualized, enhancing its formal part of the customary law (e.g., Miller 1986, 48 n. 114; 2014, 250). Some of these transactions were even euphemized as gifts, bestowed in order to increase the network of support or to validate reached agreements. The transfer of silver in these cases represented the transfer of human capital (Miller 1986, 48) which was central to the law system. Silver thus appears to be the very materialization

FIG. 3. ASPECTS OF THE SILVER'S FUNCTION IN CUSTOMARY LAW IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*.

of the feud. It embodied not only wealth, but also a web of judicial agency, honor, duty, competition, and blood revenge. On this basis it is interesting to note the handful of instances in the sagas that refer to objects or pieces of clothing made of silver being displayed at arbitration or the *thing*. This display of silver does not appear to be a coincidence but part of the material representation of the social power of the person and his or her kin in the context of legal negotiations (e.g., Miller 1984, 98 f.; 2014, 148 f.). Thus silver was paraded, worn, measured and distributed in very public settings, where the handling or display had social strategic purposes.

Skarphedin's grin and the Viking Age hoards

One day Njal brought out a pouch of money.
Skarphedin asked, "What money is that, father?"

"This is the money," said Njal, "that Gunnar paid to me for our servant last summer."

"It may turn out to be useful," said Skarphedin, and grinned (*Njála* 36).

Peace rarely lasted in the sagas and settlements usually only postponed vengeance. Thus, the weregeld hardly ever represented the conclusion of a conflict, just its passive or non-hostile phase (Miller 1983b, 340). But as soon as the hostilities flared up again, the silver was re-activated in new transactions. In some cases, the silver accumulated throughout the feud was given to a trusted ally for safekeeping as an insurance against future restitution payments (e.g., *Njála* 69, 74). In addition, if the money offered at arbitration was not offered justly or honorably, it could be refused as we saw above. In those cases certain persons were given the responsibility of managing

the accumulated silver in the inevitable event of further arbitrations (e.g., *Háv.* 7; *Njála* 123; *Vall.* 5). These cases, together with the discussion earlier in this chapter, show that the silver of the sagas circulated primarily within a fairly limited sphere pertaining to customary law and the blood feud. The very materiality of the silver itself served as a mnemonic device that embodied the feud and facilitated its memory (Miller 1983b, 343 n. 17). This is the reason why Skarphedin grinned when his father showed him the money. He recognized that the restitution money for the murder of their slave had been kept out of circulation, as substitution for the victim, and he knew that it would serve again to pay for future corpses in the conflict: all in accordance with the reciprocity of the feud (Miller 2014, 81, 83).

This character of silver may perhaps give us some answers to the persisting archaeological problem with which we opened this chapter, namely the question why so much Viking Age silver was taken out of circulation and accumulated in hoards throughout Scandinavia. Previous interpretations range from the need to hide your private wealth in times of unrest (e.g., Bolin 1926, 209) and the need to store private wealth (e.g., Östergren 1989, 335 ff.; Burström 1994), to pre-Christian funerary traditions (Thunmark-Nylén 1986, 24; Myrberg 2009, 131). Those who favor a strict market economic interpretation are especially prone to interpret the hoards as practical modes of storing wealth (e.g. Östergren 2008, 14; 2011, 322 f.). They argue that the main reason the silver was left in the ground was either death or forgetfulness. This argument is also embraced by those who regard the hoards as hiding places in times of unrest. Majvor Östergren, however, refutes the idea of the hoards as hidden treasures and refers to the close association between many of the hoards and houses, which would thus indicate that the location of the silver was no secret (Östergren 1989:235 ff.; 2008, 14; 2011, 322).

While this is not the place for an in-depth analysis of the Viking Age silver hoards, we may conclude that several of them must have required collective efforts, whether they were accumulated through plunder, trade or another activity. The bullion character of the silver is further emphasized by the fact that much of the jewelry in the hoards was produced in fixed weights (Hårdh 1996, 27, 179; 2007, 143 f.; Östergren 2008, 12; 2011, 322). This composition shows the hoards having a dual function—both display and bullion—which fits well with the nature of silver in the saga society. If we return to the previously mentioned hoard from Spillings on Gotland as an example, much of the material in it was bundled together into equal units of roughly 200 g, the equivalent of the Viking Age mark (Fig. 1). If we then advance from the usual interpretation of this hoard as an extraordinary stock of raw material and currency (Östergren 2011, 326) and instead use the dominating silver function in the sagas as an interpretative analogy, a different picture emerges.

In the sagas, the restitution paid to the murder victim's kin generally amounted to one hundred ounces of silver (3.3

kg.) for a freedman and two hundred ounces for a member of the established classes (6.6 kg.). In certain conflicts, settlements awarded six or eight hundred ounces in weregeld (*Njála* 123, 145; *Svarfd.* 12, 13, 18), representing a triple and quadruple restitution. The two deposits in the Spillings hoard would thus amount to roughly 20 hundred ounces of silver. The first deposit of 27 kg. would then represent the restitution for the lives of three or four men of the established classes, or one man whose life was awarded a quadruple restitution. The second deposit of 40 kg. would represent the price of six men or two men awarded a triple restitution each. The smaller sacks and chests in which the silver was kept in the hoard may be the result of the accumulative nature of the silver and represent the archaeological trace of the shared economic responsibility of the feud. For such amounts to be left out of circulation within the system of the feud, however, it would probably require the total collapse of arbitrations in a major regional conflict on Gotland, similar to that in the famous *Brennu-Njáls saga* which encompassed large parts of Iceland in violence. If the silver was left out of circulation, it would mean that scores were settled using corpses as payment instead.

We argue that by using the social function of silver in the sagas as an explanatory comparison, we are able to expand the interpretative framework for understanding Viking Age silver and hoards. Our analysis of the sagas shows that silver had internal, socio-strategic functions that exceeded its function as payment for goods or services. This entailed legal contexts where silver circulated as weregeld and other expenses, all within the context of the blood feud. This would also explain why the silver was accumulated and taken out of circulation: it was kept as substitutions for victims and other debts, and would only re-enter circulation to pay the atonement prices generated by the conflict. However, silver was not needed if the debts were paid in blood.

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