

Norse Social Structures, Mythology and Gudrun

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Laxdaela Saga is a romantic and historical account of the tragic lives of a group of actual Icelanders. The first part deals with this earliest generation of settlers of an almost uninhabited Iceland. Ketil Flat-Nose of Norway, son of Bjorn the Easterner, settled in Iceland around 915 (Radice 267). The second part of the saga delves into the complex world of kinships, land, and love of the second generation, like the historical figure of Gudrun, whose father Osvif descended from Bjorn the Easterner. The third part follows the lives of those who survive the tragic story to their deaths. Meanwhile, the saga revolves around two national events: the settlement of Iceland in 915 and its conversion to Christianity in 1000 (Radice 267). These historical proceedings affect marriages, lives, and deaths of many of the main characters in Laxdaela Saga. This saga is considered one of the most important in Icelandic history because the main figure of Gudrun; “was great grandmother to Iceland’s first vernacular historian, Ari Thorgilsson” (Radice 23). Laxdaela Saga focuses in the Northwestern part of Iceland in the region of Saelingsdale where Laugar is located. The saga closely follows the complex and imperfect female heroine of Gudrun, whose passion shapes the lives of those closest to her.

Hot springs play an important role in the Laxdaela Saga and in the life of its central historical figure, Gudrun. She lived with her family on a farm called Laugar in Iceland. The word “Laugar (literally, ‘Baths’), derives from the hot springs [found there]; these ‘baths’ were open-air pools of natural hot water which were used for laundry as well as personal absolutions” (Radice 119). These hot springs, crucial to early Icelandic life and saga, are a result of Iceland’s unique geological composition.

Iceland was created in the Tertiary period 100 million years ago. At this time the Laurasian land mass in the Northern Hemisphere began to split apart resulting in the beginning of the Mid Atlantic ridge and the separation of North America from Europe (Lacy 14). Hot spots formed along the north and south axis, which, when joined with a spreading movement along the rift, eventually formed the island of Iceland (Lacy 15). Due to the way in which Iceland was formed there are still large areas of hot rock some 2,000 km in diameter, beneath the earth’s crust, thus thickening the crust and providing a ripe source of surface lava, hot springs, and ejecta (Lacy 19).

The underlying magma brings high temperatures close to the surface and provides a natural resource for harboring energy and modern uses of geothermal water. Most geothermal reservoirs are found near active volcanoes, while others are the result of extreme heat below the surface and form steaming ground, fumaroles, and mud pools (Lacy 14). The ground surrounding geothermal pools may be intensely altered in color due to the sulphite deposits, which produce yellow, and haematite, showing as red. Hot springs also have the tendency of producing periodic explosive boiling in the feeder pipes of the spring. This is commonly referred to as geyser action, manifested in 50-60 foot high jets of water shooting up from the middle of the spring (Lacy 19). Hot springs are currently revenue for tourism in Iceland although people still bathe for medicinal and therapeutic motives. Modern advances in technology have taken advantage of the natural power by creating boreholes that draw the hot water from the ground. The water is used to warm greenhouses, to provide space heating, and to generate hydropower.

Moreover, in the times of Laxdaela Saga, the hot springs of Laugar provided a place where young people socialized. It is also where Gest Oddleifsson (a wise and prophetic man) met Gudrun and interpreted her four disturbing dreams. Gudrun, “a head-dress This is a pivotal moment because Gest lays out 15 year

old Gudrun's traumatic fate of four marriages involving divorce, death, lack of love, slaying, tragedy, and family feuds, "it's a grave thought, if all this is come to pass" (Radice 122). Unfortunately, all these things do come to pass and Gudrun manages to survive her turbulent life by cutting her losses and moving on when necessary.

Gudrun's first husband Thorvald, whom she never loved, slapped her during a fight and she promptly divorced him in reaction to his actions. Her second marriage to Thord ends when he drowned at sea and she in turn became a widow. After Gudrun's first two unsuccessful marriages she began to take interest in Kjartan, whose father Olaf of the Peacocks was close to Gudrun's father, Osvif. Hot springs now once again become the scene for essential points of the saga as we are told that, "Kjartan often went to the baths [with foster brother, Bolli] at Saelingsdale, and it always so happened that Gudrun was at the baths too [he] enjoyed talking to her, for she was both intelligent and fluent...Kjartan and Gudrun were [thought to be] the best matched" (Radice 140). Kjartan and Gudrun's developing relationship is the beginning of a fatal love triangle between Gudrun, Kjartan, and Bolli. The love triangle destroys Kjartan and Bolli and becomes the root of a bloody family feud spanning generations. However, it all began innocently enough in their youthful splashing among the natural baths of Laugar.

Gudrun felt passionately for Kjartan but his rash decision to go abroad changes their relationship forever. Although she insisted on traveling with him he refused, and Gudrun was left behind, while Kjartan and Bolli sailed away to Norway. The brothers became close friends with King Olaf Tryggvason and eventually converted to Christianity. The king desired Iceland to convert and applied pressure to the country by holding Kjartan hostage. Meanwhile, Bolli returned and married Gudrun, who was pushed into the marriage by her father and brothers. They lived together in Laugar during the period when Iceland converted to Christianity. Kjartan returned after four years to find his foster brother married to his former love. Bolli and Kjartan's bond was inevitably weakened and matters were not helped when Kjartan intentionally bought land in Saelingsdale Tongue on which that Bolli and Gudrun had previously made a deal. Bolli wanted more farmland for the people of Laugar but Kjartan beat him to it. Kjartan's intentional blow to the Laugar people prompts Gudrun to serve Bolli an ultimatum, "...either you leave this district with little honour, or else you confront him and prove yourself rather less faint-hearted than you have been hitherto" (Radice 169). However, Gudrun's ultimatum stems from her deeper well of jealousy and unrequited love concerning Kjartan. Bolli remained hesitant to attack Kjartan since he clearly still respected him: "[Bolli] pretends not to hear, as he always did when people spoke ill of Kjartan, for he used to remain silent or else contradict what they said" (Radice 171).

Bolli's loyalty shifted towards his people and wife and away from his foster brother because of Gudrun's insistent demands. While Kjartan was traveling Bolli and Gudrun's brothers ambushed him. Kjartan was accompanied by An the Black and they fought bravely for a long while. Bolli remained at a distance, however, until Kjartan asked why he came if he did not intend to fight. As soon as Bolli picked up his weapon Kjartan threw his down because, in his words he, "much rather accept death at your hands, than give you death at mine" (Radice 175). Kjartan exemplifies *drengskapr*, or the idea of fairness and conduct, one of the most important moral and ethical concepts in early Iceland (Radice 32). Bolli immediately regretted killing Kjartan, who died in Bolli's lap. Kjartan's wife, Hrefna, is said to have died from a broken heart after her husband's death. Bolli's fate now seems sealed, as it is generally acknowledged that, "anyone who takes up the wrong sort of challenge in the sagas, as a result of responding to the goading of others, always comes out the loser in the end" (Radice 33). So it was for Bolli, because he took up the challenge of fighting Kjartan in response to Gudrun's request.

Thus it comes as no surprise when Kjartan's death is later avenged by An the Black and Halldor. While

Bolli and Gudrun tended to their herds during the summer months and lived in a “shieling” (a hut built to accommodate herdsmen during summer grazing) in Saelingsdale (Radice 118). This is where An and Halldor attacked Bolli. Bolli heard the men coming and asked Gudrun to leave for a while, as he did not want her near the scene. Gudrun complied but not without a fight. When she returned Halldor wiped his sword covered with Bolli’s blood on the sash that covers Gudrun’s pregnant belly (Radice 188). Gudrun remained calm throughout the ordeal and even walked with the men for a while. As odd as it may seem at first, her reason for spending time with the murderers of her husband was to memorize their names and faces. Even Halldor admits that, “[she] surpasses all other women in courage and resolution” (Radice 189) and does not doubt that she will plan for revenge. Gudrun’s grief was so strong that she moved out of Laugar and to Helgafell which lies southwest of Laugar and across Hvammsfjord. Gudrun’s father and sons joined her in Helgafell which is a significant distance away from the people of Hjardarholt (the murderers of Bolli). Gudrun switched abodes with Snorri the Priest, a long time family friend who advises her to wait in planning revenge.

Gudrun enlists the help of her sons by exhibiting Bolli’s bloody clothes from the day he was murdered on their lawn. She hopes that this visceral display will stir up a lost sense of revenge for their long dead father. Gudrun is constantly motivating the men in her life to take charge because her role as a woman prevents her from doing the killing herself. Her influence over her sons, brothers, and husbands is evident as Halldor is killed and Bolli’s death is finally avenged.

Gudrun must settle for using her voice which men routinely adhere to and take seriously. She even goes as far to trick Thorgil into believing that she will marry him in return for his services in leading the revenge killings. He assists Gudrun expecting marriage in return, yet when he returns from the mission she informs him of the loopholes in her promise. He quickly informs her she will marry Thorkel Eyjolfsson instead (Radice 210). Gudrun is both ruthless and efficient in getting what she wants because she is through with living under the pressures and rule of the men around her. She was married off at 15 to a man she neither loved nor respected. Gudrun is shown later in the saga taking back control that she lost over her body and life a long time ago.

Gudrun’s father Osvif dies shortly before her fourth husband Thorkel Eyjolfsson drowns at sea. He was on a mission abroad searching for timber to build a church at Helgafell. That same day, before Gudrun receives the news she attends church. Gudrun has a vision outside the church, “she saw Thorkel and his men returned home and standing in front of the church and she saw sea-water streaming from their clothes” (Radice 234). Yet, her husband and his men had already died.

After Thorkel’s death and her vision Gudrun became intensely religious. She became the first woman in Iceland to learn Pslater and prayed for hours in church with Herdi (her son Bolli’s daughter) whom she fostered (Radice 235). The two women became very close and lived together at Helgafell. Gudrun was now old and widowed three times over; her passion of love and life was poured into religious studies and practices; becoming the first nun and anchoress in Iceland. She raised Herdi well, and she blossomed into a beautiful young woman who was married off to a noble man. Gudrun’s life fell into a calm and almost peaceful routine though she experienced sorrow. Even if the family feuds ended when Bolli’s death was avenged the main characters of Gudrun’s generation were either all elderly or dead.

Bolli would often visit his mother at Helgafell and once asked which of her four husbands she loved most. Gudrun answered that, “I was the worst to the one I loved the most” (Radice 238). Whether Gudrun implies Kjartan, whose death she arranged is unsure. Yet it is clear that Gudrun remains an enigmatic woman up until her death in 1060 (Radice 267). Historically, Gudrun is portrayed as the

symbol of a Germanic heroic spirit (Radice 35). She is a woman who leads an intense life filled with anger, lust, loss, and jealousy. However, she manages to maintain a status of nobility and infinite attractiveness. Through every scandal Gudrun somehow retains the respect of her peers and family even if she is undeserving. Her husbands' all loved her even if their love was not returned; people could not help being attracted to her or wanting to be around her. Gudrun possessed a strong sense of gumption which saved her life more than once.

The Laxdaela Saga contains similar themes and motifs found in many Celtic mythology sagas. The emphasis on courtly chivalry is present in Bolli as well as in Arthur in The Mabinogion. Arthurs rule was considered a golden age for chivalry, bravery, honor, and lavish life styles. Gudrun represents the desire for fine things in her first marriage being that she, "was hard to please in the buying of valuables, there were no jewels so costly that Gudrun did not consider them her due" (Radice 124). While Bolli emulates the romantic chivalry of the golden age for a short while when offering his brother gifts after his return from abroad in attempts to make amends for marrying his former love. Although, Kjartan snubs the offer Bolli remains kind and silent. Just as when Bolli ignores Kjartan's seizure of his house when the rest of his kinsmen become infuriated. He knew at the time that, "[the true heroes are] the men of moderation who understand the awful futility of violence and devote their lives to combating it" (Radice 33). At his best, Bolli reflects the great and wise Arthur who was a well respected ruler. However, Bolli did not heed these wise words for long and the murder of his brother brought his downfall. For a period of time the Laxdaela saga is strikingly similar to Arthur's golden age of chivalry and knightly honor.

The conversion over to Christianity is another theme parallel to Celtic literature (Radice 36). Kjartan's death, "has a flavor of Christian martyrdom about it, [he] achieves the ideal flawless art of dying a Christian death" (Radice 37). Kjartan's conversion to Christianity and observance of fasts can be seen in St. Cellach of Killala who was also killed by a former kinsman (Radice 36). It is not unusual for comparison between Icelandic and Celtic sagas to be drawn since, "the [anonymous] author lived and wrote in thirteenth century Iceland, and combined native traditions and European learning (Radice 38).

Yet the most enticing historical figure in the entire Laxdaela Saga remains to be Gudrun. Her outlandish antics and desire for revenge makes her one of the most memorable women in Icelandic culture. Gudrun's intensely filled youth high contrast to her solitary and religious elderly years. Nevertheless she brings a sense of mystery and sadness to the sites she has lived, loved, and died on. The hot springs and land of Laugar and Saelingsdale were the grounds for her harrowing life and will forever be synonymous with her story.