



Original Article

Family counts: deciding when to murder among the Icelandic Vikings

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ABSTRACT

In small scale societies, lethal attacks on another individual usually invite revenge by the victim's family. We might expect those who perpetrate such attacks to do so only when their own support network (mainly family) is larger than that of the potential victim so as to minimise the risk of retaliation. Using data from Icelandic family sagas, we show that this prediction holds whether we consider biological kin or affinal kin (in-laws): on average, killers had twice as many relatives as their victims. These findings reinforce the importance of kin as a source of implicit protection even when they are not physically present. The results also support Hughes' (1988) claim that affines are biological kin because of the shared genetic interests they have in the offspring generation.

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1. Introduction

The suggestion that numbers matter in conflict situations has been widely acknowledged ever since Lanchester (1916) articulated his principle of a relationship between relative strength and attrition rates in pre-gunpowder human warfare (Johnson & McKay, 2015). This claim is supported by evidence that both chimpanzees (Wilson, Britton, & Franks, 2002; Wrangham, 1999) and people (Buss & Duntley, 2003) are only likely to attack other individuals when they have a significant numerical advantage. However, Lanchester's Law was formulated in the context of conflicts between strangers, where numerical advantage at the time of attack may well be crucial. In species that have bonded social systems in which kin form mutually protective alliances (Dunbar & Shultz, 2010), the cost–benefit ratio associated with within-group conflict may be moderated by the risk that an aggressor incurs from retribution by the victim's relatives. In most small scale human societies, murder can trigger highly disruptive vendettas between lineages, and these vendettas often continue for generations (Chagnon & Bugos, 1979; Knauff, 1987; Lee, 1979).

Among humans, the propensity to hold back from killing close relatives (Daly & Wilson, 2001; Dunbar, Clark, & Hurst, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1991) has been attributed to the operation of kin selection (Hamilton, 1964). Nepotism is known to play a prominent role in mediating a wide range of human interactions from co-residence, to helping with farmwork and childcare, and straightforward altruism (Berté, 1988; Betzig & Turke, 1986; Chagnon & Bugos, 1979; Hames, 1987;

Hill & Hurtado, 1996; Jones, 2000; Madsen et al., 2007). Kinship might, however, play a different, but equally important, indirect role by moderating aggression between adults through the protection that kin offer a potential victim targeted by an aggressor: aggressors know that they risk retribution at the hands of the victim's relatives. In species where kin form functional alliances for self-defense, individuals may be less willing to attack those who belong to large extended families. There is some suggestion that such effects may occur in nonhuman primates. Among Old World monkeys, juveniles are less likely to threaten individuals who belong to higher ranking matriline, even when the members of those matriline are not visible (Colvin, 1983; Datta, 1983; Johnson, 1987). Similarly, in both baboons and macaques, members of a matriline may precipitously lose rank following the death of the matriarch because they lack the coalitionary support that previously prevented other individuals challenging them (Bernstein & Ehardt, 1986; Hausfater, Altmann, & Altmann, 1982).

So far, however, no studies have explicitly explored the effect of kinship on humans' willingness to attack others. Viking Age Iceland offers a unique opportunity to test this hypothesis for several reasons (for further background, see ESM). First, North European society during the first millennium AD was unusually violent since it was underpinned by a default principle of "might is right". Many of the conflicts that arose between individuals and families involved disputes over land, and in many cases were targeted attempts to acquire land or resources by force; in other cases, they were about the defense of individual or family honor (which in turn had implications for the likelihood that others would try to wrest resources from the family). Iceland during the Viking settlement period lacked any kind of overarching political authority to moderate the activities of powerful individuals, and male

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mortality from within-community conflict was unusually high (Dunbar et al., 1995). Second, kinship and extended family were extremely important, both for reasons of land inheritance and as a source of protection. With no central authority to bring killers to account, it was the responsibility of the victim's family, and occasionally friends, to pursue the case (Byock, 2001). By the same token, kin were regarded as equally culpable and thus legitimate targets for revenge killings, so much so that killings often triggered vendettas that continued across generations (Byock, 1982, 2001; Wallethe, 2010). Killing someone was thus extremely risky because it put the killer's entire kin group at risk. Third, Iceland boasts a unique set of historical records (the medieval family sagas) that detail events at the individual level as well as providing information from which extended community-wide pedigrees can be constructed (see ESM).

We tested the hypothesis that individuals preferred to target victims with smaller kin groups than themselves. We differentiate between three potential kinds of kin, namely biological relatives, affines (in-laws) and foster kin. In humans, affines (or in-laws) constitute an important class of relatives in this context because they significantly extend the pool of potential allies. One reason why affines might be willing to offer support in these cases is that they share an interest in the fitness of the progeny that arise from the marriage which unites the two families (Burton-Chellew & Dunbar, 2011; Hughes, 1988). In addition to these two more conventional types of kinship, the Vikings, in common with many other societies, also recognized foster kinship. This typically involved a child from one family living, or growing up, in someone else's household, usually as a formal recognition of a special relationship between the two families (in many cases associated with political or economic deals). Fostering arrangements were common among the Vikings, with foster relationships carrying emotional and social weight that bore many superficial resemblances to kinship, not least in terms of the language used to describe the relationship (Wallethe, 2010).

2. Methods

We collated data on major social interactions described in three Icelandic family sagas: *Egil's Saga* (Pálsson & Edwards, 1959), *Njal's Saga* (Magnussen & Pálsson, 1970) and the *Laxdæla Saga* (Magnussen & Pálsson, 1975): see ESM). Laymen often mistakenly assume that a saga is a poem. In fact, it means exactly what it does in English: a story or history. The family sagas are family histories and provide accounts of actual events that engulfed an entire community, with many being written between within living memory of the events they describe. Each saga describes the events that occurred during a particular period and gives detailed information on births, marriages and deaths, as well as more casual social events (visits, fosterings, plots, scheming, deals and, most important of all, feuds). As a result of the feuds that took place in the three sagas, 31 of the 87 males who appear in them as main characters were killed, showing just how violent such feuds could be (see also Dunbar et al., 1995).

We extracted data on 1891 separate social events (including conflicts and murders) involving a total of 1020 individuals. Since the sagas record births and marriages, as well as deaths, and Norse surnames are patronymics (and mothers' names are often specified as well), we were able to build a single extended pedigree that included all these 1020 individuals, with only a small number of isolates not related by family to other community members. Most, but not all, of these isolates were slaves. In total, there were 6015 kinship connections distributed over 1101 affinal, 50 foster, 2271 paternal kin, 1689 maternal kin and 1004 sibling connections (Table 1). Due to the status assigned to concubines in Iceland, these were counted as wives and the woman's family as her husband's affines, despite the couple not being married. Their illegitimate offspring was therefore included in the count as half siblings ($r = 0.25$) for the man's legitimate offspring since they were often raised in the same family.

Table 1
Kinship categories used in the analyses.

Biological kin	r	Number of connections in the sampled sagas
Full siblings	0.50	1004
Paternal relatives:		
Father	0.50	613
Uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, half sibling	0.25	1051
Father's cousins	0.125	607
Maternal relatives:		
Mother	0.50	262
Uncle, aunt, grandmother, grandfather, half siblings	0.25	806
Mother's cousins	0.125	521
		Total = 4864
Affinal relatives		
Wife/Husband		320
Spouse's siblings, father, mother		781
		Total = 1101
Foster kin		
Foster father		11
Foster mother		7
Foster siblings (foster parents' children)		32
		Total = 50

If a victim had close kin in Iceland, these relatives would have claimed the compensation they were entitled to under Norse customary law (either a revenge killing or blood-money: Dunbar et al., 1995, Byock, 2001). Since any attempts to gain compensation would have impacted on the killer and his family, it is unlikely that the victim's kin would not have been mentioned had there been any. Honor was of paramount importance to the Vikings and failing to avenge a murdered relative incurred loss of face and opened the family up to further attacks (Byock, 2001). Thus, if no kin are listed and no type of retribution is mentioned, it can reasonably be assumed that the victim did not have any kin in Iceland. Any family they may have had outside Iceland are irrelevant because they could not do anything about the murder, and news of any such events would have taken months, even years, to make its way to Scandinavia (assuming someone was interested enough to pass it on).

Although it is inevitable that written accounts of historical events will reflect the victor's viewpoint, there are at least four good reasons for considering the Icelandic sagas as being broadly reliable as historical documents. First, quantitative analysis of the social networks recorded in the Icelandic family sagas reveals that their structure is very similar to that for natural human social networks in the modern world. Saga networks are small world with a power law degree distribution and an exponential cutoff, and contain strong community structuring, and are quite different to the networks found in fiction and myths from the same period (e.g. Anglo-Saxon and Irish folk tales) (MacCarron & Kenna, 2013). In other words, the sagas have the appearance of describing real social worlds rather than fictional ones. Second, many of the details reported in sagas can be confirmed from independent historical and archeological sources, notably the *Landnámabók* which provides a detailed record of land settlement and transactions. The *Landnámabók* contains the names of some 3000 individuals and 1400 settlements covering the first two centuries after Iceland was first colonized in 874 AD (see ESM). Third, many individuals appear in several different sagas. Hence, it is implausible to suppose that all saga compilers, writing independently, would have failed to record the same individual's family relationships where these actually existed, especially given the importance of rights of inheritance to land through both sides of the family. Failure by one saga to list an individual's family is plausible if they were peripheral to the story, but failure by several sagas to do so is significantly less plausible. Indeed, large sections of the extended pedigree that provides the basis for this paper were built up by collating information across the sagas rather than from information given in a single saga. In any case, it is by no means the case that only victims lacked family: at least 10 (14%) of killers had no recorded kin. Fourth,

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