

# How the Sword Speaks: Violence as Dialogue in Early Germanic Literature

## Synopsis

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Reporting on the findings of each chapter of this thesis, and moreover, tying them together, has to be done in accordance with the original motive of this thesis, which was to establish violence, in intent, concept and action, as a viable method of communication between different elements of cultural networks pertaining to the social consciousness/es of Early Germanic societies. As the chapters contributing to this ethos are from sundry areas, the findings to be gathered from each may not present a linear argument, but it is to be hoped that the argument would be cohesive, and the findings representing the patterns of negotiation between violence and these cultural networks will confirm the communicative capacity of violence.

Our findings from the first section of this thesis, Defining Violence: Figures of Authority, that is, the section on the role of violence in becoming a conduit between, and definer of, certain authority figures and their dependents, will, one hopes, foster an understanding of the strategies through which violence regulates the identities/power of these authorities, and enables subjugation of and/or defiance by the dependents.

The first chapter in the first section, the chapter on God/s (titled “Gods and Monsters”) notes that the strength of belief has a symbiotic relationship with the aspects of violence working as communicators between the believed and the believer. In its first line of discussion, that is, of indirect exchanges concerning violence, we note often an invocation of divine figures in the violent practices of society such as ordeal, warfare or sacrifice, which conveys a deferential stance of the believer. On the other hand, in the section on direct exchanges of violence, we see the figures of divine authority being sustainable only so far as unreciprocated punitive violence is concerned; in *Pættir*<sup>1</sup> and Christian texts, where the pagan gods become

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<sup>1</sup> Plural form of *páttir*, a type of short story written in 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Century Iceland, which often included comic relief.

vulnerable to ridicule and scrutiny, their status of divinity is often questioned and negated by the human characters reciprocating in kind to ‘divine’ violence. In the discussions pertaining to both sections of this chapter, the divine authority of God/gods is shown to be dependent on the believer’s conceptualisation of the absolute nature of God/gods where concepts and practices of violence are concerned; the presumed superiority of divine figures makes them influential and invocable, whereas their defeat and vulnerability make them disposable, and not different from, and sometimes lesser than, their believers. Violence, thus, as concept and as practice, is shown to often negotiate between, and sometimes define, the divine and the human.

Utilising violence as a tool of negotiation and definition is also something that the Church in Early Germanic societies is seen as performing with regard to its parish, as noted in the second chapter of this section (and of this thesis), “The Church, Conversion, and Conflict”. There is in it, certainly, the obvious strategies that the Church is seen to follow in the Middle Ages, including enforcing a strong sense of *communitas*, especially regarding conversion and religious conflicts, which focuses on promoting a sense of the self and the other. What is noticeable, however, is that even the ‘self’ sought after by the Church is not something that is entirely enforced through Biblical tropes, but employs in its implementation certain cultural concepts and practices (including those involving violence) that are common to Early Germanic cultures. Here, also, violence, in its many forms of notions and practices, acts as a tool, but in its aspect as associative memory, whereby the Church in Early Germanic societies wittingly or unwittingly tries to integrate into the Early Germanic cultural consciousness Christianity as a continuation of, and not deviation from, their pre-existing cultural identity.

As the prior chapters on God/gods and the Church deal with how their connections to violence are reflective of the processes through which their authority is developed and sustained, the third chapter of the first section (and of the thesis overall), “Law and Order”,

tries to show the same with regard to the declaration and implementation of law in Early Germanic societies. Legal codes pertaining to Early Germanic societies, being images of diverse Early Germanic cultures at various points of the medieval period, have a few points of commonality shared by these cultures, one of which is that most of these laws are written down in transitional periods where, regardless of emerging monarchies, the central role of family or kin-group in authorising, upholding, or executing of the law is still enshrined within the legal functions. Hence, violence becomes a tool for representing the inter-dependence of social liabilities and law in Early Germanic societies, through the ways in which law responds to and with violence, including its punitive functions of execution and outlawry. It is, further, seen in the way these legal codes address violent crimes with potential violence only when suitable compensation is not determined by court-proceedings, with the highest sentence in this case being outlawry, which, by placing the individual entirely outside the protection of the law (and thus unqualified for *wergeld*) and rendering him or her irredeemable via compensation, essentially places the convict at the mercy of the kin-group of the wronged individual, which often effectively becomes the accused's death sentence.

The second section of this thesis, Intangible Bonds: The Roles of Social Relationships, wishes to discuss the defining ways in which components of social networks connect through violence and add nuance to it, and, in turn, are defined by these nuanced notions of violence.

This section, too, consists of three chapters, and the first chapter of the section (fourth overall), "Femininities and Masculinities", focuses on gender, or how Early Germanic notions of manhood and womanhood, and masculine and feminine behaviour, are formed by the ways in which men and women are expected to participate in violence, and vice versa. As opposed to a manhood-centred argument often characterising discussions about Early Germanic concepts of violence, this chapter has tried to showcase the connection between violence and perceptions of gendered behaviour in Early Germanic societies, through discussions on the

kind/s of participation in violence socially allowed, expected of, or denied to women, and through analysing the reasons behind certain forms of ‘female-coded’ participation in violence being criticised in able-bodied men who are expected to adhere to the normative expectations of heroic violence. The fact that violence can be used as a tool to define gender and gendered behaviour in the Early Germanic consciousness can be seen in the way law differentiates between a male and a female victim, as well as a male and a female perpetrator.

Violence, also, becomes a tool of classification and maintenance where *comitatus* is concerned, a term which we have utilised in the second chapter (titled “*Comitatus*: The Gift-giver and the Retainer”) of this section as not only a band of followers, as Tacitus had first stated it to be in *Germania*, but rather an ethos that connects the followers to their lords (and vice versa) as well as connecting the followers to each other (following an archetype established by Medievalists, see p.3 of the thesis). As for *Germania* being criticised as idealistic propaganda, Tacitus’ description, in this chapter, has not been taken as a ‘true’ account of a specific historical group *comitatus*, but rather as an account that contributed to the conceptualisation of the social archetype of ‘*comitatus*’ in Medieval Studies as denoting oath-bound and leader-centric military fellowships. At present, instead of tracing the academic history of *comitatus* becoming an umbrella term for such groups, this thesis limits its scope to examining how communicative properties of violence contribute to the dynamic of the groups that may be included in the broader definition of *comitatus* as a social archetype used in Medieval Studies. To that end, this chapter observes how the dynamic of these groups is stabilised and reinforced through practices of socially legitimized violence, and how, if at all, the premises of *comitatus* are threatened when the elements in the bond act in defiance of these practices. We hope to have shown here how the spirit of community that is fostered among the *comitatus* is actually created and sustained by the willingness of the lord and his followers to

keep to their liabilities to each other regarding violence, failing which the rubric of *comitatus* may collapse.

Similarly, the liabilities of kinship also have their own place in upholding the legal statutes and social norms in Early Germanic societies, where means of legal enforcements are limited and depend on the cooperation of the victim's and the perpetrator's families to get the cases settled. This is to say that in cases of retributive justice and warfare, kin-groups ask for, and receive payments (or inflict and endure violence accordingly where no settlement may be reached) in varying degrees for the harm done, depending on both the close nature of the kinship and/or the dues of a particular culture. As in the preceding chapters pertaining to social networks, our goal in this final chapter (titled "Kinship and Violence") of the second section has been to discuss the common motifs, if any, found in the role of violence as an indicator/communicator of kinship liabilities, as well as their inhibitor. Through discussing literary/textual examples of allegiance to the kinship liabilities and defiance thereof concerning violent acts, we hope to have shown here how much, and to what extent the varying degrees and kinds of kinship influence, or are influenced, by these actions of allegiance and defiance, reiterating the second section's emphasis on navigating the role of violent practices in sustaining social liabilities, as well as the importance of social liabilities in preserving and preventing normative violent practices.

The third section takes into account all the concerns of the first two sections, that is, authorities and social relationships, and tries to see how those networks of meaning manifest in the way certain materials interact with violence. The third section, Mate-realities: Material Realities, has attempted its best to observe how the cultural identities of materials, created by their (the materials') usage in violence or violence-related acts, may manifest in realities of their own, where these materials are able to communicate on their own terms with violence, as do their users.

To this end, we have observed how “Weapons and Their Wielders”, the first chapter of this section (and seventh overall) suggests a cultural penchant for attributing unique identities to the weapons, which, in addition to a figurative personification of the weapons, may also be for the assumption that these weapons, by association with their wielders or otherwise, have also come to assume a certain subjecthood and/or agency which may not always align with their current wielders’. Hence, the subjecthood of weapons, as discussed in this chapter, causes us to view the weapon not only an instrument, but also as an associate or aide which is not compelled to align its intent and/or agency with that of all of its wielders, rather, which may problematise, interrupt or re-define the wielder’s response to and involving violence.

The second chapter of the third section (and eighth overall), “Places and Performers”, focuses on the way both violence and its performers may be defined by the spaces where they are categorically allowed, restricted and forbidden, and how they, in turn, may influence how the allowances, restrictions and prohibitions were connected to the spaces. Out of the discussion on this chapter a clear association between the violence-related allowance/prohibition of these spaces and their authorities is borne out, where both an individual’s right to perform violence and his/her right to be protected from violence have to be sanctioned by the authority/ies controlling these spaces. This is why *hólmgang*, conducted in a space where the judicial parameters consider the battle outcome as paramount, cannot hold the victor responsible for compensation under law, or why sacrifice, despite being committed in sacred spaces where violence by the common men is prohibited, is allowed on account of being a mark of power of the authority the divine figure holds. By the same right to authority does the Church allow a fugitive to take shelter, or an individual has legal protection inside his private property even against the king. Conversely, then, it is through losing the status as a legal individual/person that the outlaw loses his right to protection against violence in any space, including his own and his kin’s. Through this chapter, then, we experience the role of

communicative aspects of violence in shaping the dynamic between places where violence is allowed/restricted/prohibited, and the performers who wish to commit/escape violence within it; the subjecthood of the spaces in accepting and rejecting these individuals and/or these actions, therefore, is also not as apparent as the weapons, and mediated, instead, through the authority/ies of those who regulate them.

The different findings of these eight chapters, however, had one single purpose, to show that violence can potentially be seen as a codified dialogue, or an ongoing communication connecting perceptions of certain elements (that is to say, authority figures, social networks, and material) pertaining to cultural networks in Early Germanic societies; to this end, only the reader may be able to gauge the success of the argument presented in the thesis.