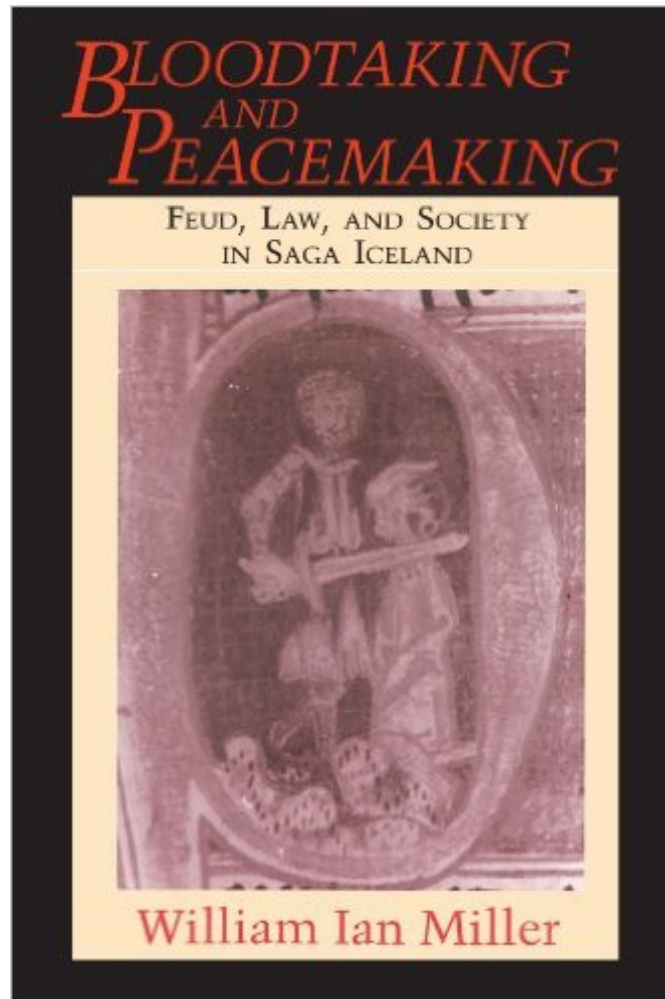


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# Bloodtaking And Peacemaking: Feud, Law, And Society In Saga Iceland



## Synopsis

Dubbed by the New York Times as "one of the most sought-after legal academics in the county," William Ian Miller presents the arcane worlds of the Old Norse studies in a way sure to attract the interest of a wide range of readers. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* delves beneath the chaos and brutality of the Norse world to discover a complex interplay of ordering and disordering impulses. Miller's unique and engaging readings of ancient Iceland's sagas and extensive legal code reconstruct and illuminate the society that produced them. People in the saga world negotiated a maze of violent possibility, with strategies that frequently put life and limb in the balance. But there was a paradox in striking the balance— "one could not get even without going one better. Miller shows how blood vengeance, law, and peacemaking were inextricably bound together in the feuding process. This book offers fascinating insights into the politics of a stateless society, its methods of social control, and the role that a uniquely sophisticated and self-conscious law played in the construction of Icelandic society." "Illuminating." —Rory McTurk, *Times Literary Supplement* "An impressive achievement in ethnohistory; it is an amalgam of historical research with legal and anthropological interpretation. What is more, and rarer, is that it is a pleasure to read due to the inclusion of narrative case material from the sagas themselves." —Dan Bauer, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book while a student in Miller's semi-infamous class "Blood Feuds" at the University of

Michigan Law School. I went into the class thinking that it would be interesting and fun, but that I wouldn't learn much from it, since I already had such an extensive familiarity with the Icelandic sagas: as an undergraduate I had translated some of them from Old Norse to English, and I had read most of the rest of them several times over in English translation. Yes, it was interesting and yes, it was fun, but man! were my eyes opened as to how much I had to learn about the sagas and about the culture within which they were written. There are two main reasons to read this book. First, to learn history. The history of ninth to fourteenth century Iceland is incredible, and the culture fascinating. There was a culture that knew no central or even local government, no law enforcement infrastructure, and no arms control. And yet the Icelanders developed a complex system of law, essentially codifying the blood feud (which tradition still governs dispute resolution in places like Afghanistan and rural Macedonia), according to which civil injustice could be roughly corrected. Their example has much to teach us about human nature unadulterated by the State. Second, *Bloodtaking* is an unparalleled gateway into the sagas as literature. Despite my intimate familiarity with every line of, for example, *Hrafnkel's saga*, until I read Miller's book I had only the most inadequate appreciation for how tightly it is constructed, how elegantly and efficiently it was drafted. The sagas are only vaguely comparable to the very best English-language short stories; the skill that went into them is comparable to that of a Dante or a Shakespeare. A modern reader is not culturally prepared to receive the sagas as they would have been by a medieval Icelanders. Miller's book provides the small set of cultural factoids that create relevance where otherwise detail might seem pointless or obscure, and reveals the saga-writers' penchant for humorous understatement and emphasis by ellipse. Armed with a relatively small set of cultural facts and with an eye for a small set of saga tropes, the reader has access to a whole new literary world. Whatever your bent, *Bloodtaking* makes for fascinating reading.

Most historical text deal with the nobility or myths of a society. It is exceedingly difficult to find out how the average man lived especially 800-1200 BC. This work helps to change that. Iceland is unique in that it had no centralized government for hundreds of years so it essentially lived in a state of anarchy. There was one exception, a fully formed and complex legal system designed to deal with every possible issue. Their process differed from ours in that they included blood feud as another instrument in regulating society and legal outcomes. Essentially, if you weren't interested in instituting "self-help" then the ultra-masculinized courts had little sympathy. This work also delves deeply into the everyday minutiae of pre-feudal society. At turns you can see these stories on an episode of "Jerry Springer" and others show the depth of human bravery and logic. The book pulls

from primary source and is surprisingly well paced for such an academic work. A definite read for those interested in cultural studies, jurisprudence, nordic studies, anarchist theory and power dynamics. Highly unique and one of the most compelling reads out there.

I thought I had reviewed this long ago, but apparently not. And now there is little I could say that isn't covered in the reviews by xaosdog and Aaron M. Slattery. The best I can do is give the highest praise to not only Dr. Miller's scholarship, but also his writing style and clarity of thought and presentation. One other thing may be worth mentioning: Along with the fascinating analysis of aspects of the society of medieval Iceland, Dr. Miller provides as a by-product subtle (and sometimes not quite so subtle) cautionary insight into the methods, mores, and limitations of academic research in the social sciences in particular, and by analogy in the "hard" sciences, also. I spent most of my life in academia, and rarely have I seen anyone so gently but perceptively comment on those subjects.

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