

**'It is generally thought that you are rather too poor': Saga Iceland, a Marriage Proposal, Rejection and the Reasons Why
(Abstract)**

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Both *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* recount the story of the berserk brothers, Halli and Leiknir.¹ Soon after their arrival in Iceland, Halli asks Vermundr, the man who had invited the berserks to accompany him to Iceland, to find him a suitable wife. *Eyrbyggja saga* notes that Vermundr 'did not think he knew a likely woman of good family who would want to tie herself to a berserk for the rest of life, so he kept putting it off.'² Realising that Vermundr is doing nothing to fulfil his request, Halli and his brother become ill-tempered, angry and disobedient. Faced with such behaviour, Vermundr determines to rid himself of the berserks and, after a number of abortive attempts, he eventually persuades his own brother, Styrr, to accept them. The berserks are only with Styrr for a short time when he becomes conscious of the fact that Halli has taken to chatting with his daughter, Ásdís. Styrr warns Halli not to disgrace him by attempting to seduce his daughter, but despite this warning ringing in his ears, Halli informs Styrr that he wishes to marry Ásdís - a proposal on which Styrr clearly does not look kindly. Diplomatically, Styrr first consults with his friend, Snorri goði, before informing Halli that "it is generally thought you are rather too poor [*heldr féltíll*] [to marry Ásdís]."³

This story is noteworthy for many reasons, but for the purposes of this paper, the tale is particularly significant for one reason: a detailed study of the berserks' desire to marry and, in particular, the reception of this aspiration by both Vermundr and Styrr provides an excellent starting point for a consideration of the marital strategies attributed to the early Icelanders by the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century saga texts.

As his vocalised objection to the union, Styrr comments on Halli's poverty. A logical proposition to be drawn from this would be that wealth, whether in terms of pecuniary assets or property, is a desirable component in a marital union. Both a cursory examination of the saga evidence, coupled with known marital strategies evident in mainland medieval Europe, would support such a supposition, but were land and movable goods, their acquisition, retention, and transmission, really such a key element in the marital processes of the saga Icelanders? Their importance depends, in part, on the inheritance practices of the saga Icelanders; if the laws of inheritance were such that spouses were unable to inherit from each other (as the law code, *Grágás*, stipulates was the case in the thirteenth century), then forming a marital alliance with the hope or intention of acquiring land or wealth may not have been a realistic or key strategy. It was, however, not the actual physical acquisition of wealth that was important in the marital process, but the attributes that wealth might bring to the union:

¹ As a point of clarification, this paper does not intend to suggest that either *Heiðarvíga* or *Eyrbyggja sagas* should be taken uncritically as historical sources. The emphasis is on the Iceland of the sagas, and the paper will be discussing practices as they appear in the sagas.

² *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 25

prestige; authority; power; social standing; and the possibility of forming strategic alliances for support in feuding situations. Halli, due in large part to his lack of wealth, simply has nothing to give: he has no status; no men; no authority; and no support, legal or otherwise. Wealth may indeed have a role to play in the marital strategies of the saga Icelanders, but it is by no means, as Styrr might have us believe, the over-riding concern of those forming, contemplating, accepting, or rejecting proposals of conjugal alliances in the *Íslendingasögur*.