OREN FALK

How many-manned will you ride?
Shaming by numbers in medieval Iceland

non enim in multitudine est virtus tua Domine
neque in equorum viribus voluntas tua
nec superbi ab initio placuerunt tibi

Judith 9:16 (in Biblia 1: 702)

Introduction
On 9 September 1208, Kolbeinn Tumason, the predominant goði [chiet-tain] in the North of Iceland, fell in a clash with the followers of Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237). Kolbeinn’s brother, Arnór, promptly turned to his kinsmen, the Sturlungar, for support (see fig. 1). The for-

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at Norsesstock II (May 2007). All translations are my own. I retain the alternation of tenses typical of medieval Norse literature. To the extent allowed by the fonts available to me, I retain the orthography of editions cited, but normalise spellings when writing in my own voice. I’m deeply indebted to Ármann Jakobsson, Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Roberta Frank, Ian McDougall and Torfi Tulinius for debating with me the interpretation of a key saga passage discussed in this article, as well as to the anonymous referees who read and commented on the article as a whole.


Abstract: The words fjölmennr (here rendered ‘many-manned’) and fámenr (‘meagre-manned’), as well as related forms, have attracted little attention from philologists: they seem too self-evident to be worth the bother. Close examination, however, shows them to be unevenly distributed across the corpus, and reveals significant patterns in their usage. I focus in particular on a small number of interrelated phrases in the Family Sagas and Sturlunga saga, which communicate specific attitudes and thus serve as surprisingly rich sources for a cultural history of medieval Iceland. Beyond their surface meaning, questions like ‘how many-manned will you ride?’ allude to images of idealized masculinity, express speakers’ opinion of the persons addressed, and seek – often belligerently – to motivate addressees to definite courses of action.

Keywords: fjölmennr, fámenr, heljarmadr, Family Sagas, Sturlunga saga, denotation and connotation, cultural history, gender history, heroism, incitement, status and honour, humiliation, intercession, peace-making.
tunes of this family had been on the rise since the time of the eponymous Hvamm-Sturla (1116–83) and would continue to soar throughout the life of the Icelandic Commonwealth, into the 1260s. Three of Hvamm-Sturla’s sons were politically active in 1208: Þórðr the eldest (b. ca. 1165), whose son, another Sturla, would eventually (ca. 1280) pen Íslendinga saga, our main source for these and other thirteenth-century events; Sighvatr, the most ruthless of the brothers (b. ca. 1170); and Snorri, the youngest (b. ca. 1179), future literary genius. Sighvatr had been a close ally of Arnórr’s for some time already (having married his and Kolbeinn’s sister, Halldóra, a decade earlier), so enlisting his backing was not a problem, and Snorri was quick to join the avenging coalition too. Sighvatr then turned to brother Póðr to recruit his support as well, and Póðr gave him to understand that he was willing, on principle, to take part in the venture. Encouraged, Sighvatr questioned him further:


(Íslendinga saga cap. 23 [28], in StS 1: 250–51)

‘But how many men will you have with you?’ ‘Four others’, says Póðr. ‘How will you do me any more good than anyone else, if you have so few men?’ ‘You’ll see’, says Póðr. Sighvatr was then angry and mounted in a
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huff, and they parted in this fashion. and þóðr said this, that afterwards their kinship was never such as it had been before.\(^2\)

The 700-strong levy that eventually beset the See of Hólar and broke the bishop’s power in April 1209 consisted of the followings of seven goðar, almost all of them mutually related by blood or marriage, but þóðr Sturluson was not among them (see fig. 2).

This paper explores a peculiarity of Sighvatr’s testy dialogue with his brother: the charged question of the number of followers þóðr would bring if he were to throw his lot in with those opposed to Bishop Guðmundr. A single, unassuming word, fjölnenmr, is at the hub of my investigation. As befits a quotidian term, it has drawn little attention – neither of the major scholarly editions of the saga, for instance, indexes it as a noteworthy lexical item – if only because its modern reflex, fjölnenmr, remains a part of the active Icelandic vocabulary, and so has fooled

\(^2\) The episode gets picked up in the fourteenth-century sagas of Bishop Guðmundr, such as GSA cap. 137 (160–61). Zimmerling (2003: 558–59) suggests that GSA may have relied on a recension of Íslendinga saga closer to Sturla’s original than the version edited into Sturlunga saga (ca. 1300).
native speakers into taking its intelligibility for granted. Living language functions as a reservoir of differential meanings, silting up over time; it falls to the social and cultural historian, implementing what Thomas Osborne (1999: 59) has called ‘archival reason’, to dredge this lexical ditch in order to reveal ‘the explanatory relevance of the mundane[:]. It is not that archival reason necessarily seeks out the obscure detail or the uninteresting fact, but that for such kinds of reason the true field of explanation lies with the realm of … everyday life’. The historian who chooses to obey archival reason follows the motto ‘that “power is ordinary”. Do not begin with great transhistorical laws and do not begin with the acts and pronouncements of the powerful themselves … but look behind the scenes of power at its everyday workings and machinations, wherever you may find them’. In its nondescript ordinariness, fjölmannr is just such a site where the operation of everyday power may be observed, if only we deign to lower our gaze from the philological heights to the trenches in which historical runoffs pool.

Variations on Sighvatr’s phrase, hvé fjölmannr muntu vera, recur elsewhere in the medieval Icelandic corpus in the context of mustering troops for martial purposes. As I demonstrate below, amidst these recurrences we may perceive an idiom canalising the flow of a minor saga motif. In the fullest realisation of this motif, posing the question of projected posse size becomes a rhetorical funnel for chuting disdain: pre-existing disrespect sloshes against the words, staining them with pejorative sentiment, and sluices out the bottom in a torrent of abuse. Beyond a straightforward enquiry after hard numbers, ‘how many men will you have with you?’ becomes an expression of alarmed scepticism, implying lack of faith in the addressee’s ability to handle himself responsibly, and ultimately an instrument for conferring dishonour, condensing nebulous contempt into a hostile flood of scorn. We must keep in mind, however, that idioms and motifs are meandering, variable verbal rituals, not deep-cut performative riverbeds: users can and do subtly shift their meanings, set different cargos afloat on their current, and channel their flow in idiosyncratic directions. As should become apparent in the course of the

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3 Besides StS, I have consulted also Örnólfur Thorsson (1988). Fjölmannur appears, for instance, among 96 fjöl- compounds listed by Árni Böðvarsson (1993: 215–16).

4 As a dear former colleague tartly observes, literary scholars are in the business of studying beauty and turning it into dross, while historians begin with dross and proceed in the opposite direction.

5 Meulengracht Sørensen (1993) remains the single best, concise introduction in English to medieval Iceland’s history and literature. See also Clover and Lindow (1985); Jónas Kristjánsson (1988); Clunies Ross (2000; 2010); O’Donoghue (2004); McTurk (2005).

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discussion below, the present case is no exception, and medieval Icelanders proved themselves adept at directing the jet of this fluid motif, even in heavy idiomatic seas.

The lexicon of enumeration

The word at the focus of my investigation, fjölmenr, is an adjectival form, transparent enough even to those not fully conversant in Old-Norse–Icelandic (ON-I): the first element, fjöl-, is cognate with German viel and Old English fela, ‘many’, while the second, -menr (or its variant, -meðr), is akin to English ‘man’ (cf. ON-I maðr, ‘person’). Fjölmenr thus means ‘in the company of many men’ and might literally be rendered as ‘many-manned’. Nominal and verbal reflexes of the same compound also occur: fjólmeni, ‘a large body of men’ (and, by extension, ‘the people’ or ‘the public’), at fjölmenna, ‘to assemble many men’ (including creating a multitude ex nihilo, hence ‘to people’), as well as secondary by-forms, such as adverbial fjólmenniliga, ‘in a multitude’, or the adjectives allfjólmenr, ‘with very many men’, and javsfjólmenr, ‘with an equally large following’. The fjólmen- family of words has also sired a cadet branch, the alliterating antonym fámennr (and some byforms), which, predictably enough – fá- is cognate with English ‘few’ – means ‘in the company of few men’, or ‘meagre-manned’. (Employing such rather ungainly neologisms allows me to emphasise semantic unities in the ON-I vocabulary: different shades of meaning, which in English would normally be rendered by a variety of terms, cohabit within ON-I words like fjöl- or fá-menr.) I return to the fámennr family below.7 These lexemes are probably not particularly old, though their precise age is difficult to gauge. The compounds occur infrequently in skaldic (but not in eddic) verse, some of which may reach back into the eleventh century, as well as in Landnámabók and Íslendingabók of (perhaps) the early twelfth century.8 In the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century prose sagas, in con-

7 A future desideratum would be a comparative study of the fjólmen- and fámenn-word families with structurally homologous and semantically synonymous terms, such as mannfjöldi, mannfr, etc.

8 Hans Kuhn’s eddic glossary (vol. 2 of Neckel 1962–68) gives no attestations of the fjólmen- family, and is likewise silent on fámenn- and its byforms. LP2 lists five skaldic instances of fjólmenr, among them two in Snorri Sturluson’s thirteenth-century Háttatal (vv. 29, 69; 1999: 16, 29–30, and see pp. 57, 67, assigning both stanzas to Snorri’s own pen), and one each attributed to the eleventh-century Valgarðr á Velli (v. 7 in Skjóð B1: 361 = v. 7
trast, we find ca. 700 attestations of fjölmenn- and its derivatives: a good 300 or more in the Family Sagas (Íslendinga sögur),\(^9\) nearly 160 in Sturlunga saga and some 130 in Heimskringla – the summa of Kings’ Sagas (Konunga sögur) – and about 85 further instances in the Legendary Sagas (Fornaldar sögur).\(^10\) Words in the fámenn- family are considerably rarer, cropping up a mere 35 times or so throughout the sagas.

\(^9\) This rough gauge is based on Bergljót Kristjánsvør et al. (1998) – not always the most infallible of tools – which yields 260 occurrences of *fjölmenn*. I have cross-checked this number against the texts at the Fornrit website, which give a somewhat higher total of 311. Adding Færeyinga saga and Hrana saga hrings, the þættir [short sagas], as well as Jómsvíkinga saga (all at Fornrit), the total rises to 363 hits.

\(^10\) I am greatly indebted to Eiríkur Rögnvaldsson of the University of Iceland for making available to me a digitized, searchable text of Örnólfur Thorsson (1988). My tally of the Fornaldar sögur is based on a word-search through the texts posted at the Norrøne kilde tekster website (86 hits), digitized from Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (1943–44), cross-checked against the texts at Fornrit (84 hits). For Heimskringla, I have searched the texts at Norrøne kilde tekster, digitized from Linder and Haggson (1869–72). No other Konunga sögur are available to me in searchable or comprehensively indexed format.
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Table 1. Approximate frequency of -fjólmenn- and -fámenn- words in various types of sources. (The figures provided are my best approximations, based on word searches in machine-readable texts and in comprehensively indexed editions. Given the unreliability of some editions used, the range of manuscript variants not yet edited or not accessible to me, and the possibility of human error on my part, all numbers should be taken as rough indications only.)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>-fjólmenn-</th>
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<tr>
<td>skaldic verse</td>
<td>ca. 6</td>
<td>ca. 2</td>
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<td>Landnáma bók and Islendingabók</td>
<td>ca. 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Sagas</td>
<td>ca. 290-360</td>
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<td>Sturlunga saga</td>
<td>ca. 157</td>
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<td>Kings’ Sagas (Heimskringla)</td>
<td>ca. 130</td>
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<td>Legendary Sagas</td>
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dactic literature or diplomataria, hagiography or encyclopaedic works), even in an impressionistic manner, is considerably more difficult. All that can be said with any authority, thanks to the wide coverage of the on-going ONP project, is that both word families are attested in practically every genre of Norse texts, from (at least) the late twelfth century on (see table 1).13

These compounds lend themselves to neutral enough usage, showing up in every conceivable constellation where the question of numbers might come in for scrutiny. An Icelandic Advent sermon from ca. 1200, for instance, calls on believers: *come early and many-man greatly to church in honour of the holiday!* (de Leeuw van Weenen 1993: 102r).14 In chronicles of the 13 I am deeply indebted to Pórður Helgadóttir for making available to me ONP’s fjólmenn- and fámenn- attestation slips ahead of their release, now at the dataONP website. The majority of examples in the next two paragraphs are drawn directly from those slips. I am likewise grateful to Ian McDougall for his patient explanation of the ONP’s methodology, which relies on illustrative examples culled from previous dictionaries and other sources, rather than on sifting through a comprehensive concordance of all attestations; it is thus impossible to reconstruct overall statistics from their data.

14 For the underlying Latin – which says simply *ad vigilias maturius convenite* [assemble for services earlier] – see Caesarius of Arles, ‘Sermo 188’ (1953: 2.769); the correspondence was first identified by Bekker-Nielsen (1958). Cf. sermon 11, ‘Ermahnung zu christlichen Leben’, in Assmann (1889: 142): *come to church often with righteous belief and good intent*, a correspondence first pointed out by Turville-Petre (1960). Some Icelanders evidently heeded such calls, as mentioned in one of St Pórlok’s miracles: A Breiðabólstaðið í Fljótshlíð var fjólmenni mikit at tóum Jakobsmessu. Ættu menn þangat at sækja kirkjüdagstíðir ok byskupsmessu...
same era, we hear of a king who lét blása til fjölminnなり stefnu [had (trumpets) blown (to summon) a many-manned meeting] (Orkneyinga saga cap. 19, ÍF 34: 39). Several recensions of the vita of Jón Ögmundarson, the first Bishop of Hólar (canonised around the same time), tell that the men of the Northern Quarter reinforced their demand for a See of their own by noting that theirs was fjórðungrinn sá fjölminnstr ok mestr [the most many-manned and greatest quarter] in Iceland (Jóns saga ins Helga cap. 7, ÍF 15: 193). A generation or so later, in his synthesis of Norse mythology, Snorri Sturluson has Hár (routinely identified as an Óðinn avatar) note that allmikit fjölmenni er [i Valboll], adding plaintively: ok mun þó oflítit þykkja þá er úlfinn kemr [there are an awful lot of many-men (in Valhalla) … but still it will seem too few when the wolf comes] (1988: 32). Snorri also measures an earl’s pretensions by the fact that [s]at hann jafnan med fjölmenni, svá sem þar væri konungshíð [he always had about him many-men, as though it were a king’s retinue], and describes each of the Italian cities sacked by King Haraldr harðráði as big, powerful and many-manned (Óláfs saga helga cap. 22 and Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar capp. 6–8, both in Heimskringla, ÍF 27: 29 and ÍF 28: 76–78, respectively). Throughout the thirteenth century, then, the vocabulary of many-manning quite literally and reliably indexes high population densities.

About a century after Snorri, the author of Stjórn tells of an Israeliite defeat at the hand of the Philistines in which they suffered mikinn mannskaða i hófðingia falli oc fjölmennis [a great slaughter, the fall of (both) aristocrats and many-men]; fjölmenni here clearly assumes the sense of multitudo, a plebeian horde distinct from the elite few (Unger 1862: 435). In a later fourteenth-century translation of Gregory the Great’s Dialogues, we learn that gud hafdi fyrire at fiolmenna kyn Aabræ fra Isaac [God preordained the many-manning of Abraham’s kindred by Isaac], an inspired glossing of the original’s drab verb, multiplicare (Benedictus saga Appendix cap. 8, in Unger 1877: 1.190). Differ-

[A great many-men were at Breiðabólstaðr in Fljótshlíð on St James’ feast day (25 July); people had to go there for the church dedication anniversary and for the bishop’s mass] (Porlákis saga C cap. 66, ÍF 16: 258).

15 Cf. Snorri’s so-called Separate Saga of St Óláfr cap. 88 (Johnsen and Jón Helgason 1930–41: 1.249), as well as his Óláfs saga helga cap. 102 (in Heimskringla, ÍF 27: 170).
17 For the underlying Latin (Deus semen Abrahae multiplicare per Isaac praedestinavit), see Gregory the Great’s Dialogues 1.8.6 (1978–80: 2.74). See similarly Veraldar saga
ent manuscript versions of the early fifteenth-century Bevers saga alternate parlament with fiolmenni (Bevers saga cap. 22 [B] / 23 [C] 2001: 229). And a mid-century adaptation of the Vita Ambrosii informs us that one of the saint’s beneficiaries var sva fothrumr, at hann matti eigi i fiolmenni vera [was so infirm on his feet that he could not be among many-men] (translating in publico), until miraculously healed (Ambrosius saga býskups cap. 25, in Unger 1877: 1.48). The terminology shows up in legal documents, too: King Christian III’s sixteenth-century ordinances for a barely Reformed Icelandic Church, for instance, warn that a bishop’s provost on visitation must ecki kona fiolmennari enn med einn wagñ [never come more many-manned than with one wagon] (DI 10 [doc. 95 §5]: 117–328, at p. 229).

This sampling illustrates the wide range of meanings words in the fiolmenn- family may have, all of them quite forthrightly denotative. Shades of meaning are easy enough to discern, allowing the lexicographer to map different senses within the word family, but there seems to be no mystery to these usages: no difficulty in determining which of several meanings may apply in a particular case, nor any residual significance clinging to specific instances which might hint at a richer social reality than that captured by formal dictionary definitions.

(15). Snorri, in his Prologue to the Edda (if indeed it is his; see von See 1988, esp. pp. 18–30), likewise uses the verb to describe the peopling of the world after the Deluge: Eptir Nóa … fjolmennisk ok bygðisk verldin [After Noah … the world was many-manned and settled] (1988: 3).


19 The miracle occurs when the poor man is bægt af fiolmenninu … ok vard hann undir fotum troðinn af byskupi síðum [trampled by the many-men … and was trod underfoot by the bishop himself]; he is then cured by the stampeding prelate. For the underlying Latin, see Paulinus of Milan, Vita di Sant’ Ambrogio cap. 44 (1996: 126). Cf. Óláfs saga helga cap. 68: Er þat ok þin þjónosta at tala í fjolmenni þat, er ek vil mela láta [It’s also part of your duty to say among many-men that which I wish to have announced] (in Heimskringla, ÍF 27: 87); and Egils saga cap. 31, where Skalla-Grím forbids the three-year-old Egill from attending a feast því at þú kannt ekki fyrir þér at vera í fjolmenni, þar er drykkjur eru miklar, er þú þykkir ekki góðr viðskiptis, at þú sér ódrukkin [because you can’t handle yourself among many-men when there is heavy drinking, seeing as you’re never easy-going even when you’re sober] (ÍF 2: 81).

20 This limiting clause is absent from the parallel Latin text, p. 292. Cf. a similar usage in Jónsbók part 2 cap. 2 (NGL 2: 204); and the complaint voiced in Óláfs saga helga cap. 74, that King Óláfr fór með her mans um landit, en ekki med þvi fjolmenni, er log væru til [travelled about the land with an army of men and not with the many-men allowed by law] (in Heimskringla, ÍF 27: 102).
Contextual cues

There is more to language than just dictionary definitions, however. Specific contexts of usage tend to clump particular associative clusters around the strict denotations. In what we may call the ‘historical sagas’, -fjölmenn- compounds occur mainly in two contexts. The first is that of festivities or formal sociable occasions, whose grandeur the vocabulary of many-manning helps celebrate: Búask þeir bræðr við veizlunni; leggr Óláfr til óhneppiliga at þríðjungi, ok er veizlan búin med ínum bestu fongum; var mikit til aflat þessar veizlu, þvi at þat var ætlat, at fjölmenn mundi koma [The brothers prepare for the feast; Óláfr lays out his third unstintingly, and the feast is supplied with the best provisions. A lot of effort went into this feast, because it was planned that many-men would come], the author of Laxdæla saga recounts. And er at veizlu kemr, er þat sagt, at flestir virðingamenn koma, þeir sem heitit hofðu. Var þat svá mikit fjölmenni, at þat er sögn manna flestra, at eigi skyrri níu hundrud. Pessi hefir þannur veizla fjölmennust verit á Íslandi, en sú þannur, er Hjaltasynir gerðu eri eptir foður sinn; þar váru tölf hundrud. (cap. 27, ÍF 5: 74; cf. cap. 79, ÍF 5: 232)

[when the time of the feast arrives it is said that many distinguished people showed up, they who had been invited. It was so many-manned that it is most people’s opinion that there were no fewer than a thousand. This was the second most many-manned feast in Iceland; but the first was the wake which the sons of Hjalti held for their father. There were fourteen hundred there.]

Having a standing-room-only party – ‘the second most many-manned ever held in Iceland’ – provides a measure of the celebrants’ social prominence and of their success in orchestrating an event that should redound favourably on their reputation. The vocabulary of many-manning here figures in an entirely straightforward role, correlating directly with social significance. Similarly, when Unnr in djúpúðga arranges Óláfr feilan’s wedding feast, the author of Laxdæla saga dully notes: Boði[t] var allfjölmenni, ok kom þó hvergi nær svá mart manna, sem Unnr hafði boðit, fyrir því at Eyfirðingar áttu farveg langua [It was an enormously many-

21 I follow scholarly convention in referring to the Kings’ Sagas, the Family Sagas and Sturlunga saga (as well as, to some extent, the Bishops’ Sagas) as historical in orientation, in contradistinction from the more fantastic Fornaldar and Riddara sögur; I discuss the question of historicity further in This Spattered Isle: Violence and Risk in Medieval Iceland (unpublished manuscript). My impression of the Fornaldar sögur is that they use the terms in a manner similar to that of the historical sagas, but I have not studied the question closely.
manned banquet, even though nowhere near as many people came as Unnr had invited, because for the Eyfirdingar it was a long way to go] (cap. 7, ÍF 5: 12). Alongside weddings and wakes, horsefights, too, might be rated for their festive congestion: *Bar var fjölmenn í og göð skemmtan* [It was many-manned and there was good entertainment] (Gunnars þatr Þórandabana cap. 1, ÍF 11: 195). Even clergy, for all their pious focus on matters transcendent, are not immune to this sort of secular status shuffling: *Herra Árni byskup hafði ok optliga fjölmennar veizlar heima á staðnum* [Lord Bishop Árni also often held many-manned feasts at the See] (Árna saga biskups cap. 13, ÍF 17: 22).

The second main context for speaking of *fjölmennir* is in accounts of calling on supporters for martial or political campaigns, for feuding raids or wrangling at the þing [assembly]. (The difference between the two modes is, after all, more often than not exceedingly fine: both feuding and politicking are typically waged armed, both often turn bloody, and either one is liable to metamorphose into the other at the bat of an eyelid.) Here, too, the size of the following one can assemble is a reflection on one’s status, of course, but there are also more brusquely pragmatic considerations at work. In antagonistic encounters, be they with swords or words, large crowds of supporters are a prerequisite for facing off with one’s adversaries, and sensible men take care to line up their associates before staking out any sort of public position. *Eyrbyggja saga* provides a typical example: *Um várit lét Snorri búa mál til Pórsnesþings á hendr Arnkatli um þræladrápit; fjölmennu þeir báðir til þingsins, ok hélt Snorri fram málum* [In the spring, Snorri had a case against Arnkell prepared for (presentation at) the Pórsnes þing for the slaughter of the slaves. They both many-manned to the þing, and Snorri proceeded with the case] (cap. 31, ÍF 4: 86). Both Snorri and Arnkell anticipate trouble and prepare by summoning a sizeable following ahead of time. Often, in fact, the recurring idiom is: *Fjölmennu þeir þá mjók, hvárirtveggju* [They then many-manned greatly on each side].

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22 The same kind of usage is in evidence in Sturlunga saga, as well: e.g. *Porgils saga skarða* capp. 2 [222], 24 [243], 56 [295], 62 [301], 73 [312] (all in StS 2: 106, 149, 197, 207, 217). It is curious that, within Sturlunga saga, *Porgils saga skarða* alone exemplifies this usage.

necessity and propriety of assembling sizeable support squads is evident in the effort all antagonists make to show up with as large an entourage as feasible. Nor is it considered improper to back down before steep odds, as is evident from the following example from 1230 (where the litotes eigi allfámennr stands in for the positive form): var [Porvaldssonum] sagt, at Sturla væri i Holti eigi allfámennr, med hundrað manna. Treystust þeir þá eigi at sekja fundinn [(The sons of Porvaldr) were told that Sturla was at Holt, not at all meagre-manned – with over a hundred men. Then they did not have the confidence to seek an engagement] (Islendinga saga cap. 79 [84], in StS 1: 340).

The sagas thus reinforce the commonsensical implications of fjölmenn-terminology by highlighting their political dimension, where high numbers correlate directly with high status. The baseline against which idiomatic variation may be perceived, therefore, is the axiom that multitudes unproblematically embody power: the many-manlier one’s assemblage of allies and followers, the further one can expect to project one’s will, both on the battlefield and at þing.

Idiomatic multitudes:
heroics, honour and hellish men

In all of the preceding examples, quantitative compounds fulfill a transparent function, as gauges of the size of friendly ensembles or aggressive squadrons, where more is indisputably better: when the poet Valgarðr á Velli calls the Norwegian monarch Haraldr harðráði a fjölmennr konungr, he clearly means to imply that his is a well-endowed lord (Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar cap. 19 [v. 93], in Heimskringla, ÍF 28: 93).24 In more oblique usages, we witness fjölmennr begin to exert its own gravitational pull on the semantic field surrounding it, nudging words into idiomatic (though by no means entirely fixed) orbits and indenting the curvature of semiotic space. Thus, for example, when the wily Geitir plans on killing Brodd-Helgi – his brother-in-law and former fast friend but now a bitter enemy – he dangles the small following with which he plans to travel to the þing as bait:

24 Indeed, all of the ca. 130 instances of fjölmenn- I have identified in Heimskringla – the only collection of Kings’ Sagas available to me in readily searchable form (cf. n. 10 above) – are literal and unremarkable. The discussion that follows thus concentrates on the Family Sagas and Sturlunga saga.
How many-manned will you ride?

En er dró at þingi, þá hittask þeir Brodd-Helgi ok Geitir, ok spurði Helgi, hversu fjolmennr hann vildi riða til þingins. ‘Hví skal nú fjolmennari fara’, segir hann, þar ek á ekki um at vera? Ek mun riða til þingverðs þings ok riða við fá menn.

[But as the þing drew near, Brodd-Helgi and Geitir met and Helgi asked how many-manned he would ride to the þing. ‘Now why should I go quite many-manned’, says he, ‘when I’ve nothing going on? I’ll ride to the opening of the þing and will ride with few men.’]

Brodd-Helgi had earlier remarked that Geitir er vitrastr vár, þótt hann verði jafnan ofríki borinn [Geitir is the smartest among us, but still he is overborne by main force every time] (Vápnfirðinga saga capp. 13, 8, ÍF 11: 47, 43). This once, however, Geitir uses his superior cunning to manipulate Helgi’s perception of numerical proportions, offsetting the latter’s brute advantage and creating an opportunity for himself to have the upper hand, at long last.

Brodd-Helgi’s enquiry already demonstrates the settling of idiomatic sediment around the terminology of many-manhood. Reported in indirect speech, his question (as I have indicated in boldface above) echoes Sighvatr’s wording in conversation with Þórr almost verbatim; it suggests that the turn of phrase they both use may have constituted a stable verbal configuration which speakers of ON-I could draw on without too much reflection. As Helgi and Geitir are ostensibly on good terms, the resort to formulaic phrasing may help muffle the raw suspicion driving the former’s enquiry. In Vápnfirðinga saga, however, we may still accept the phrase as merely a literal probe for numbers; perhaps the confluence of Helgi’s and Sighvatr’s turns of phrase is no more than coincidence, signifying nothing. Helgi knows enough to be wary of Geitir. When he hears the latter’s response, he proposes: ‘Pá er ek fer, munum vit hittask’, kvað Helgi, ‘ok riða báðir saman. Ek mun ok med fá menn riða’. ‘Vel mun þat mega’, segir Geitir ['We two ought to meet when I go’, said Helgi, ‘and ride together. I too will ride with few men’. ‘Sure, let’s’, says Geitir] (cap. 13, ÍF 11: 47–48). In this way, Helgi thinks, he will be able to keep tabs on Geitir; matching the sizes of their entourages should act as a mutual disincentive to violence. His plan fails miserably, but unfortunately, there is a lacuna in all manuscripts just where we would expect to learn how Geitir gets around Helgi’s precautions and does him to death, so the details of Brodd-Helgi’s debacle remain obscure.

In the Islendinga saga conversation, in contrast, Sighvatr both expects and hopes for a multiple-digit reply, and is accordingly surprised and disappointed by Þórr’s answer. From Sighvatr’s point of view, the issue
is entirely self-evident and simple: numbers are a prerequisite for successful campaigning, a universally accepted fact. There is no upside to committing an undersized troop to battle. The universality of this truism may be illustrated by countless saga examples. For instance, when Egill Skalla-Grímsson must lead King Æþelstan’s numerically inferior garrison against Óláf Skotkonung[r] ok fjólmenn hans [the king of the Scots and his many-men] at Vínheíðr, he famously resorts to subterfuge to inflate the impression his threadbare troops make: eigi váru menn í ínu þríðja hverju tjaldí, ok þó fáir í einu. En er menn Óláfs konungs kömu til þeira, þá hóðu þeir fjólmenn fyrir framan tjóldin òll, ok náðu þeir ekki ìnn at ganga; sögðu menn Aðalsteins, at tjöld þeira véri òll full af mónnum [in every third tent there were no men, and few in any. But when King Óláf’s men came to them (to parley terms), they many-manned in front of all the tents and denied them entry; Æþelstan’s men said that the tents were all full of men] (Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar cap. 52, ÍF 2:130–33). Even so great a hero as Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, usually capable of handling all comers on his own, gratefully receives his kinsman Óláfr pá’s friendly advice: bað hann þó vera varan um sik, – ‘því at þeir munu gera [þér] þat illt, er þeir megu, ok far þá fjólmennr jafnan’. Hann réð honum morg ráð, þau er heil váru, ok mæltu þeir til innar mestu vináttu med sér [he (= Óláfr pá) asked him (= Gunnarr) to be careful all the same, ‘because they’ll do (you) whatever harm they can; always go about many-manned’. He counselled him many things which were sound, and they declared the greatest friendship between them]. (The same advice is soon reiterated, worded in the negative, by none other than the sage Íjáll himself: Hann bað Gunnar vera varan um sik … bað hann aldri fára við fámenni ok bafa jafnan vàpn sín [He asked Gunnarr to be careful … asked him never to travel with meagre-men and always to have his weapons (ready)]; Íjáls saga capp. 59, 60, ÍF 12:151,152)

Gunnarr voices no objections to Óláf’s and Íjáll’s advice. Both the narrator’s approving commentary and Gunnarr’s own avowals of friendship confirm that their counsel is prudent and well-meant. Still, Gunnarr does not follow it. The choice of whether to heed or ignore the commonsensical tactical wisdom of gathering troops can clearly become a touchstone of heroism. Only a fool would go up against his enemies without first assembling supporters – ‘bare is a brotherless back’25 – and so he

25 For the aphorism, attested in ON-I in both Grettis saga cap. 82 (Berr er hverr á bakinu, nema sér bróður eigi, ÍF 7:260) and Íjáls saga cap. 152 (Berr er hverr at baki, nema sér bróður eigi, ÍF 12:436), see Harris’s Concordance website (citing also variants in related traditions).
who deliberately sallies forth without this compulsory safety in numbers must mean to establish his foolhardy credentials. Such a sentiment is paradigmatically enunciated by Þorgils Póðarson, the tough-as-nails protagonist of Flóamanna saga, announcing his intention to attack a certain Ásgímr: Gizurr sagði þat óráðligt, – ‘því at hann er miklu fjölmennari en þú’. Þorgils kvaðst eigi hirða um fjölmenni hans [Gizurr said that was ill-advised ‘because he is far more many-manned than you’]. Porgils said he didn’t give a damn about his many-men] (cap. 32, ÍF 13: 321).

This point is further illustrated by the closest verbal parallel to Sighvatr’s query, which occurs in Porsteins þáttr stangarboggs. Here – having goaded her husband, Bjarni goði, into taking decisive action against his upstart neighbour Porsteinn – mistress Rannveig is alarmed to discover Bjarni arming himself, evidently preparing to set out to face Porsteinn on his own: ‘Hversu fjölmennr skaltu fara?’ segir hon. ‘Ekki mun ek draga fjölmenni at Þorsteini’, segir hann, ‘ok mun ek einn fara’ [‘How many-manned will you go?’ she says. ‘I shan’t recruit many-men against Þorsteinn’, he says; ‘I’ll go alone’]. Rannveig is worried enough to try to dissuade him from the very mission that she herself had urged him, just the previous evening, to undertake. We can almost hear the trepidation in her voice as she puts the numbers question to Bjarni, already anticipating his answer; on hearing his response, she worries that he has truly lost his mind: ‘Gerðu eigi þat’, segir hon, ‘at hætta þér undir vápn heljarmannsins’ [‘Don’t do it!’ she says, ‘To risk yourself against the weapons of that hellish man!’] (ÍF 11: 74).

But if Rannveig and Sighvatr both respond to the single-digit answers they receive with outrage, the sources of their dissatisfaction are very different. Sighvatr subtly challenges his brother to step up and acknowledge fraternal obligations, to join his kinsfolk in mounting a major campaign; Póðr’s paltry reply, með fimmta mann, brings down upon him Sighvatr’s exasperation and scorn, and ‘their kinship was never such as it had been before’. By failing to promise the fjölmenni necessary to render his intervention credible and decisive, Póðr (in Sighvatr’s view) exhibits spinelessness and infidelity: he is unable to commit forces and unwilling to commit loyalties. Their would-be common enemy, Bishop Guðmundr, is irrelevant to the dialogue except as a reference point in relation to which Póðr should have aligned his priorities. In Porsteins þáttr stangarboggs, on the other hand, the interplay between the two present speakers and their absent adversary is more complex. In Rannveig’s view, Porsteinn (who has already dispatched three of Bjarni’s household men) is a beljarmadr, ‘hellish man’, an exceedingly dangerous foe who must be coun-
tered with overwhelming odds; her dismay is aimed at Bjarni’s apparent devil-may-care flippancy in the face of such grave peril. Bjarni’s bravo, in turn, allows itself to be read as deprecation of Þorsteinn’s prowess. He may be dangerous to others, Bjarni could be understood to say, but he’s nothing I can’t handle on my own. Thus, while Rannveig’s question focuses on mental capacities (and implicitly criticises the soundness of her husband’s), Bjarni’s reply seemingly addresses the issue of physical competence (and seemingly disparages Þorsteinn’s). (Only ‘seemingly’ because, as I have argued elsewhere, Bjarni’s disdain is not directed at Þorsteinn at all, but at Rannveig’s bellicose needling. Bjarni is playing his cards close to his chest, but his plan is evidently to recruit Þorsteinn to his following rather than to destroy him.)

A similarly complex dynamic plays out in a minor episode in Laxdæla saga, where the sagacious Eiðr advises his great-nephew Þorkell Eyrjólfssson, future husband of the redoubtable Guðrún Ösvísfrsdóttir: ‘Þykki mér þú mikla til hætta, hversu ferðin teksk, en at eiga við heljar-mann slíkan, sem Grímr er. Ef þú vill fara, þá far þú við marga menn, svá at þú eigir allt undir þér’ [It seems to me you risk much, the way you go about it – and taking on such a hellish man as Grímr! If you wish to go, then go with lots of men, so that you have everything in hand]. Eiðr does not use the word fjólmenni and speaks with the voice of authority not enquiry, but the conceptual bottom line is identical: he is critical of Þorkell’s judgement and thinks he ought to take reinforcements against a fiendish foe such as he intends to hunt down. His interlocutor is unmoved, however: ‘Þat þykki mér engi frami’, segir Þorkell, ‘at draga fjólmenni at einum manni’ [‘I see no glory’, says Þorkell, ‘in recruiting many-men against a single man’] (cap. 57, ÍF 5: 172). Grímr may be a formidable adversary, but not so imposing that it would take a village to raze him; in fact, it would be downright dishonourable to do so. Thus, as in Porsteins þáttar stangarhöggs, Eiðr’s numerical concern finds fault with the mental faculties of the man he addresses, while Þorkell’s quantitative attention is turned to disparagement of an absent third party’s physical capability.

Another variation on this pattern occurs in Grettis saga, where the

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26 See Falk (2005), e.g., p. 31: ‘Bjarni’s action is … not a botched assassination but a successful implementation of the decision to preserve his adversary’s life’. 
How many-manned will you ride? would-be bounty hunter Gísli sets out after the eponymous (and outlawed) protagonist: skol ek eigi fjolmenni draga at bonum [I shan’t recruit many-men against him], Gísli first boasts when he means to track Grettir, and he starts off with only two companions. Here, there is no Eiðr or Rannveig to call Gísli’s machismo into question: on the contrary, Þórði líkaði vel þessu ráðagörð [this plan suited Þórðr (the man who egged Gísli on) fine]. Like his solitary analogues, Þorkell in Laxdæla saga and Bjarni in Porsteins þátr stangarhøggs, however, Gísli soon learns that his rival is mightier than he had reckoned – a veritable fiend, even (kvad þar sjálfan fjáðann fyrir vera [he said the devil himself was there]). After receiving a thorough thrashing at Grettir’s hands, Gísli confesses that [s]á er eldriin heitastr, er á sjálfum liggr, ok er illt at fásk við beljarmanni [that fire is hottest which one is right next to – and it’s miserable to contend with a hellish man] (Grettis saga cap. 59, ÍF 7: 189–190, 194, 192). Again like Þorkell and Bjarni – though considerably more ignominiously – Gísli is also lucky enough to live to tell of his encounter with his potent opponent.

Thus we find that the question, ‘how many-manned will you ride’, explicit as in Sighvatr’s and Rannveig’s rebukes or implicit as in Eiðr’s and others’ advice, represents a fixed idiom of sorts in ON-I, as mundane and predictable as ‘how do you take your tea?’ in modern English. Equally standardised is the reply (explicit or implicit) that is deemed narratively appropriate: skol ek eigi fjolmenni draga at bonum [I shan’t recruit many-men against him] – ‘black, no sugar’ – because, as Þorkell spells out and as others surely think in private, engi frami [er] at draga fjolmenni at einum manni [there (is) no glory in recruiting many-men against a single man]. (A further suitable riposte may be to stress the putative supernatural potency of the projected antagonist, a heljarmaðr to whom normal rules of engagement should not apply.)

Table 2 details

27 The point is reinforced by Bárdr digri in Þorvalds þátr tasalda, who explains he has prepared a troop in ambush at ef fjolmenni væri dregit at mér, ætlada ek til þeiva at taka ok njótta lóðsmunar [so that if many-men were recruited against me, I might resort to them and take advantage of the difference in numbers], but has disdained calling on his men ef til mín kvæmi tveir eða þrír [if (only) two or three came at me] (ÍF 9: 125). Bárdr believes the eponymous Þorvaldr must have supernatural powers, since he has all but bested him in unarmed single combat: Þá verðr nú til þess at taka, sem ek hefi eigi fyrir þurft, at biðjá mér liðs í móti einum.… [E]n þó vil ek eigi at þú rennir optar á mik, trollist, þó at þú nefndisk Þorvaldr … en þó mun vera, at þú skuldir maðr heita, ok munt vera heildr fjolknunnigr [So now it must be resorted to – what I’ve never before had to do – to summon help against a single man.… But still, I don’t want you charging at me again, you troll (even if you give your name as Þorvaldr) … then again, it might be that you can be called a man, but you must be rather sorcerous] (ÍF 9: 123).
the way this exchange plays out in various texts. In yet another episode in *Laxdœla saga*, the author riffs on this idiomatic cluster when the elderly Hrútr catches one Eldgrímr in the act of making off with his nephew Þorleikr’s stallions:

Hrútr spurði, hvert hann skyldi reka hrossin; Eldgrímr svarar: ‘Ekki skal þik því leyra; en veit ek frændsemi með ykkr Þorleikí; en svá em ek eptir hrossunum kominn, at ek ætla honum þau aldri siðan; hefi ek ok þat efnt, sem ek héf honum á þíngi, at ek hefi ekki með þjólmenni farit eptir hrossunum’. Hrútr ségrir: ‘Engi er þat frami, þóttu takir hross í brett, en Þorleikr liggi í rekkuðu sinni ok sofi; efniir þu þat þa best … ef þu hittir hann, aðr þu ríðr ór héraði með hrossin’.

[Hrútr asked where he was driving the horses. Eldgrímr answers: ‘I shan’t hide it from you, though I know of your kinship with Þorleikr; but I’ve come for the horses in such a way that I don’t intend him ever to have them again. I’ve also carried it out as I promised him at the þíng, in that I’ve brought no many-men to fetch the horses’. Hrútr says: ‘There is no glory in it if Þorleikr lies in his bed asleep, even if you do take the horses away. You’d carry on best … if you met him before you rode out of the district with the horses.’]

Eldgrímr had previously sought to acquire the horses in more above-board negotiations with Þorleikr, but had been rebuffed; their conversation had ended with Eldgrímr threatening to take the animals against
their owner’s will (‘ðetta sumar mun ek fara … bjóð mér engan liðsmun’ [‘this summer I’ll come view the horses, whoever of us two should happen then to own them thereafter’]) and Porleikr declaring himself unperturbed (‘Ger, sem þú heitr, ok bjóð mér engan liðsmun’ [‘Do as you threaten, just don’t come at me with overwhelming odds’] (Laxdœla saga cap. 37, IF 5: 104, 103). Porleikr’s stipulation acts as the equivalent of Rannveig’s question or Eiðr’s counsel, albeit in a positive register: rather than criticise Eldgrím for failing to load the dice in his favour, Porleikr challenges him to play fair. By showing up alone, Eldgrím considers himself to have given the traditional reply: his ek hefi ekki með fjölmenni farit eptir brossumum parallels Bjarni’s ekki mun ek draga fjölmenni at Porsteini. Yet Hrótr is quick to deflate Eldgrím’s pretension to be acting gallantly: engi er þat frami, he says (echoing Þorkell’s disavowal of bringing fjölmenni to bear on Grím), since – with his rival snoring blissfully in bed – the odds Eldgrím gives Porleikr are more like 1:0 than 1:1 (cf. Miller 1990: 101–4). The question of my title has here been transformed into a challenge and the single archetypical conversation split into two – Eldgrím with Hrótr in the first round, Eldgrím with Hrótr in the second – while the critiques have been realigned to fall solely on the lone interloper, rather than being shared between him and his absent antagonist.
This rearrangement highlights a profound difference between how this shaming motif plays out in the Family Sagas and in the example from *Íslendinga saga* with which I began. Bjarni, Þorkell, Gísli, even Eldgímr, all use the idiom to express their sense of self-sufficiency: the task I have set for myself, each of them affirms, is not so difficult that I would need to raise a mighty posse in order to accomplish it. In the *Íslendingasögur*, we thus see quantitative assessment serving to proclaim courage and competence, albeit in a manner liable to meet with dramatic irony and leave the speaker with egg (or his own life’s blood) on his face: actual prowess laps at the shores of discursive heroism, spraying its rocks but never quite able to wet its higher ground. In the opening example from Sturla’s *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, rather than a would-be hero using the phrase to toot his own horn, we see one man use it to interrogate another’s willingness to contribute to the war effort. In Sighvatr’s mouth, the question becomes a tool for direct denunciation of Pórðr’s accountability and valour. Sighvatr asks bví fjölmennr munu vera not in order to protect his brother from himself but to probe (and prod) Pórðr’s sense of family solidarity. Accordingly, his deployment of the motif serves not to warn Pórðr against overly ambitious self-confidence but to berate him for an underdeveloped sense of vengeance. To Sighvatr’s ears, Pórðr’s med fimmta mann, rather than swaggering with braggadocio as Bjarni’s mun ek einn fara did, has the hollow ring of churlishness.

As with the many, so with the few

Sighvatr accordingly underscores his point by throwing in his brother’s face the alliterating antonym: *Hvat skal mér þú heldr en annarr maðr, ef þú ert svá fámennr?* [How will you do me any more good than anyone else, if you are so meagre-manned?]. This compound packs just as much semiotic punch as its more numerous counterpart – especially, but not solely, when the two words face off in taut juxtaposition. In *Hœnsa-Pórir saga*, for instance, a similarly dubious question serves to characterize the eponymous villain succinctly. *Hœnsa-Pórir* has successfully recruited the noble Þorvaldr to go against the equally noble Blund-Ketill; when, en route to their ill-fated errand at Ketill’s home (which will end with Pórir duping Þorvaldr into committing arson), Þorvaldr meets his scruffy ally accompanied by only two men, he registers surprise – he himself has brought thirty followers: *Þorvaldr meðt: Hví ertu svá fámennr, Pórir?*
How many-manned will you ride?

Hann svarar: ‘Ek vissa, at þik myndi eigi lið skorta’ [Porvaldr spoke: ‘Why are you so meagre-manned, Þórir?’ He replies: ‘I knew you wouldn’t be short on troops’] (cap. 8, ÍF 3: 21). Not only has Þórir manipulated his better to take up his cause against the righteous Ketill, he has the audacity to dismiss the expectation that he carry his own weight as though he were being importuned: Porvaldr, Þórir seems to snub, really ought to be responsible enough to arrange for his own supporters – he can’t expect others to make up his shortfalls!

Fámennr has a different valence in the account of a similarly ill-fated raid, staged in 1228 by the Vatnsfirðingar brothers, Snorri and Þórir Porvaldssynir, on Sturla Sighvatsson’s farm Sauðafell (see Grove 2008). Here the adjective serves to underline the raiders’ zeal in whipping themselves up to a killing frenzy: Var þat þá ætlan þeira at veita atgöngu, hvárt er Sturla væri fyrir fjölmennari eða fámennari, ok sækja með vápnnum þeim, ef kostr væri, eða með eldi [Then it was their intent to mount an assault, whether Sturla were more many-manned or more meagre-manned, and to attack the farmstead with weapons if that were an option, or with fire (if they had no choice)] (Íslendinga saga cap. 71 [76], in StS 1: 326).28 The attackers, a rowdy crowd of boys still wet behind the ears, are eager to commit themselves to desperate resolve, no matter how stiff the resistance they meet, no matter how dastardly the methods they must resort to for overcoming it. To the Vatnsfirðingar’s greater ignominy, Sturla, it turns out, is not at home at all – a ratio, as in Hrútr’s critique of Eldgrímr’s furtive raid on Þorleikr’s horses, of many-to-zero – leaving them to vent their fury on women, servants, clerics and other inappropriate targets.29 (Above, p. 102, we saw the same sons of Porvaldr, a tad older and perhaps a smidge wiser than at Sauðafell in 1228, disengage when they perceive Sturla to be eigi allfámennr.)

But perhaps the most charged instance of fámennr occurs a few chapters earlier, during a chance confrontation in 1222 between Sighvatr

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29 Fjölmennr and fámennr are similarly juxtaposed in ostentatious indifference in Hrölf’s saga kraka ok kappa hans cap. 40: Aðils konungr sagði: ‘Pat sé ek, at þit farið ekki at mannvirðingu í ókunnu landi, eða hví hefir Hrölf mágr ekki fleira lið?’ Svipdagr sagði: ‘Pat sé ek, at þú sparir ekki at sitja á svíkráðum við Hrölf konung ok menn hans, ok eru þar lítil undr, hvárt hann rðir hingat fámennr eða fjölmennr’ [King Aðils said: ‘This I can see, that you’re not travelling in unfamiliar territory in a dignified manner; for why does kinsman Hrölf not travel with a larger retinue?’ Svipdagr said: ‘This I can see, that you don’t hold back on plotting treason against King Hrölf and his men; and whether he rides here meagre-manned or many-manned is hardly a matter of note’] (in Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1943–44: 2.71).
Sturluson and a few of his neighbours. Among these was a certain Hafr, whose family was neck-deep in feud with the godi’s: earlier that winter, Hafr’s brother had slain Sighvatr’s eldest son, Tumi. On this day, Hafr and two fully armed companions happened to run into Sighvatr, out riding on his own:

snær hann á móti þeim ok brá at hendi sér kápunni. Þeir Hafr riðu at týngarðinum, ok vár u engar kveðjur. Hafr spurði: ’Hví er goðinn svá fámennr?’ ’Ek vissa eigi, at ek þyrfta nú manna við’, segir Sighvatr. Þeir Hafr horðust á um hriði, áðr þeir sn eru á brótt, en Sighvatr gekk heim. (Íslendinga saga cap. 43 [48], in StS 1: 289)

[he turned towards them and wound his cloak around his arm. Hafr and his men rode up to the homefield fence and there were no greetings. Hafr asked: ‘Why is the godi so meager-manned?’ ‘I didn’t know that I’d need men along now’, says Sighvatr. Hafr and his companions looked him over for a while before they turned away, and Sighvatr went home.]

The tension in this face-off is palpable: Hafr’s party pondering the risks involved in slaying one of the best-connected men in Iceland against a golden opportunity that may never present itself again, Sighvatr doing his best to project masterly disdain. Had Hafr kept his mouth shut, had he simply gone ahead and tilted at Sighvatr, he might have prevailed; but his very enunciation of the question – his suspicious incredulity at so unlikely an opportunity having landed in his lap – paints Sighvatr into a heroic corner. Whereas in 1209 Sighvatr had perceived a fámennr Þórðr as enervated, in 1222 he turns his own precarious solitude into a weapon of psychological warfare: bereft of a chieftainly fjölmenni, he can do nothing but stand his ground and glare. In this staring match, it is his enemies who blink first.

The recurring question, ‘why so meagre-manned?’, reiterates the uni-dimensional scope within which the issue of entourage size is typically framed in saga discourse: as a brute expression of political potency. Numbers are routinely assumed to serve no purpose other than to manifest one’s power and ram through one’s agenda, most often by naked force. Hafr and his companions struggle to wrap their minds around the

30 Hafr’s lineage, although not precisely known, was not insignificant: we learn elsewhere that Einarr skemningr, his brother, was related to Bishop Guðmundr (see Arons saga cap. 5, in StS 2: 241, 311 n.51). Hafr’s restraint did not pay off: a short while after this encounter, he was murdered in his bed by one of Sighvatr’s minions (StS 1: 289–90). See also the discussion of Hafr in Nordal (1998: 59–60, 224–27; ‘Einarr’ thrice misprinted for ‘Hafr’ on p. 224).
idea that so powerful a magnate as Sighvatr might be out and about on his own; finally, however, they accept that he, like Þorgils Pórdarson or Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi, must be heroic rather than destitute. Sighvatr himself in his 1209 spat with Þórðr (like Þorvaldr godi when he meets an under-prepared Hœnsa-Þórir) adopts the opposite interpretation of unimpressive numbers, but he is clearly operating within the same frame of reference: having already learnt that Þórðr does not intend to ride fjölmennr, there would have been no point to Sighvatr’s bitter follow-up question, Hvat skal mér þú … ef þú ert svá fámennr?, unless he took it for granted that the levies one raised were the one reliable instrument for projecting chieftainly force. Sighvatr thus could not interpret Þórðr’s pale promise as anything but betrayal by a brother who, like Hœnsa-Þórir, offers token support so anemic as to be no help at all.

Conclusion
Of course, the author of Íslendinga saga – Þórðr’s son – likely did not share uncle Sighvatr’s opinion of the import of Þórðr’s unwillingness to raise troops against the bishop. Both Þórðr and Sturla after him were, in fact, rather partial to Bishop Guðmundr, supporting him at many points during his conflict with the other Sturlungar (Giklamini 1983; Guðrún Ása Grímssóttir 1988: 31; Úlfar Bragason 2010: 76, 127–28, 149, 157, 220). Having authorial bias line up in this way with a character’s outlook precludes the unleashing of dramatic irony against Þórðr, barring it from lashing him as it does other fjölmenni-disavowing characters. And this raises one final, intriguing possibility of reading the motif under consideration here: if Sturla represents his father Þórðr sympathetically, as a prudent and far-sighted hero, presumably he imputes to him some specific (but unstated) purpose in promising his brother meagre support. What might the scheme Þórðr kept up his sleeve have been?

The answer may be that spurning safety in numbers could serve as a way not only to enhance one’s claim to courage, as in Gunnarr’s case, or to ‘hol[d] one’s counsel and [risk being thought] a thief or a murderer’, as in Eldgrím’s (Miller 1990: 103), but also as a strategy for courting compromise rather than driving for decisive victory. This is the way Bjarni plays his solitary hand with Þorsteinn, and – more by necessity than by design, no doubt – also the way Þorkell ends up dealing with Grímr in
It seems that this is what Pórðr Sturluson had planned to do in the encounter with Bishop Guðmundr, as well. At the outset of the dialogue between the brothers, Pórðr had responded to Sighvatr’s invitation to join the attack on the bishop by enquiring *hverju hann skyldi ráða, ef hann færi* [what say he should have (in decision-making), if he went], to which Sighvatr replied: ‘Hví muntu eigi ráða því, er þá vill’, segir Sighvatr, ‘eða hvé fjölmannr muntu vera?’ [‘Why shouldn’t you have as much say as you want’, says Sighvatr, ‘but how many-manned will you be?’]. By juxtaposing his willingness to cede a great deal of decision-making power to Pórðr with an enquiry after the amplitude of his brother’s following, Sighvatr insinuates a proportional link between raw numbers and political influence: why shouldn’t you, he seems to tell Pórðr, have as big a say as the force you are willing to commit? For Sighvatr, aggression is the natural idiolect on every occasion, and fjölmanni the necessary vehicle for articulating it; Pórðr, on the other hand, is more interested in ráð [counsel], and hopes his words will carry the day when push comes to shove. Pórðr’s enigmatic reply to Sighvatr’s

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31 A complementary idea underlies Pógils’s words, spoken in 1121 on the brink of yet another abortive clash with Hafliði’s following: *Pat veit ek glöggt, ef þar er svá mikit fjölmanni sem sagt er, at þar muni þeir margir, er i minum flokki myndi sik kjósa heldr, ef þeir þyrði, ok muni þeir lítt berjast við Hafliða* [I perceive clearly that – if there is such huge many-men there as is reported – there will be many (among them) who would prefer to be in my troop, if they dared, and they’ll fight little for Hafliði]. His primary point, of course, is to uphold his own men’s morale by downplaying the significance of reports that Hafliði’s force far outnumbers them; but he is also articulating as a point of strategy the truism that, in a large levy, there are bound to be some whose commitment to the cause is less than die-hard, potential vacillators who might defect or act as intermediaries, if given the chance. His next sentence is even more telling: *Þeir muni ok þar margir, er fagna myndi því, ef annarr tveggja okkar léíst, en hirða myndi þeir aldrí, hvárr á brott kæmist* [There will also be many there who will be glad if either one of us (sc. Pógils himself or Hafliði) should perish, and who wouldn’t care in the least which one might get out (alive)]. His own troop, in contrast, he says, is made up of svá trauta menn … ok mjök örugga, at hverr mun heldr vilja falla um þeovan annan en mér verði neitt, ok munum vör að því fram halda [such trusty and utterly undaunted men that each would prefer to fall in the other’s footsteps rather than fail me, and so we will push on] (Pógils saga ok Hafliða cap. 23, in StS 1: 40–41). Pógils is essentially saying that within any fjölmanni – his own troop excepted – some fámenni may inevitably be found who resemble Bjarni, Porkell or Pórðr. Cf. also Sturla saga cap. 9, where the presence of multitudes is cited in yet another type of argument against hostilities: *Einarr hljóp upp ok eggjaði atgöngu. En Porleifr beiskaldi þá hann eigi stefna mönnun í svá mikinn váða, at aldrí leygist, sem ván var á, ef svá mikit fjölmanni skyldi berjast* [Einarr leapt up and urged (that they should) attack. But Porleifr beiskaldi pleaded with him not to steer men into so great a danger, from which they might not save themselves, as was to be expected if such huge many-men should fight] (in StS 1: 74). Here, the focus is on the presence of the multitudes themselves as disincentives to violence, which is likely to turn horrific when such fjölmanni are involved.
derision – ‘you’ll see’ – may therefore be more than just an offended non-sequitur. The role he intends for himself is perhaps not that of providing additional firepower, but rather that of brokering settlement and making peace.

Þórðr’s wording stops short of fully revealing his intention, so neither Sighvatr nor we may be entirely certain of his plans. Numbers alone are inconclusive evidence: there is no strict correlation between pacifism and fámennir. Other peacemakers in the sagas sometimes amass troops precisely so that they may force combatants to stand down: this is how the amoral Snorri godi presets a limit to the bloodletting at the Battle of the Alþing in the wake of Njáll’s burning, how Guðmundr dýri breaks up two engagements before they had begun, at the beginning of his public career in 1187, and how a certain Ísleifr Hallsson rescues Bishop Guðmundr from the clutches of his enemies at the end of a hard fight in 1220.32 Conversely, we have already seen examples aplenty of men bent on martial or felonious action who surround themselves with few followers or none, from the heroic Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi to the horse-thieving Eldgrímr and farm-burning Hænsa-Þórir. Sighvatr’s exasperation at his brother’s meagre-manned approach confirms that he is bewildered rather than just angry, unsure of just what Þórðr has in mind: ‘How will you do me any … good?’ Only through painstaking, comparative philology – juxtaposing Þórðr’s words with the nearly synonymous phrases spoken by the likes of Bjarni godi or Þorkell Eyjólfsson – would Sighvatr have been able to come to a probable conclusion about Þórðr’s purpose.

The solitary man, able to plot courses that others might regard with shock or alarm, automatically fell under a pall of suspicion; but in some cases, he turns out to have been that rare individual able to avoid the multitude’s groupthink and come up with innovative solutions, dependent on variables other than enforcement by brute numbers. In medieval Iceland, no less than in other societies where testosterone normally speaks louder than words, an enquiry into one’s many-manned intentions (sometimes paired with a contrasting expression of distrust, dismay or disgust at an anticipated or actual meagre-manned reply) tended to fall into the rhythms of virile posturing; the collocation ‘how many-manned will you ride’, in particular, became a catchphrase for ferreting out brag-

32 For these episodes, see Njáls saga caps. 139, 145 (ÍF 12: 372–73, 402–8), Guðmundar saga dýra cap. 3, and Ísleifings saga cap. 37 [42] (both in StS 1: 163–65, 276–77); I discuss Ísleifr’s intervention in greater detail in Falk (2015). Cf. also Þorgils saga ok Hafliða cap. 19 (in StS 1: 36); Laxdœla saga cap. 87 (ÍF 5: 246); Harðar saga cap. 10 (ÍF 13: 27).
garts or needling sissies. Rannveig and Eiðr illustrate the former usage in their critiques of Bjarni and Þorkell, whom they took to be overgrown boys too big for their britches, on the model of the swaggering Vatnsfirðingar; Sighvatr and Brodd-Helgi exemplify the latter, chastising Þórr and mocking Geitir for their unwillingness or inability to live up to the obligations of their gendered position. All four speakers were acting on cues supplied by their culture, drawing on the idiom made available by their language, responding to stimuli provided by their interlocutors: a path as overdetermined and effortless as painting by numbers. Yet, in three of the four cases, later developments proved the criticism misguided: Geitir managed to overpower Brodd-Helgi, Bjarni and Þorkell conspired to make peace with Þorsteinn and Grímr, respectively. We may therefore suppose that Sighvatr’s denunciation of his brother was, in all likelihood, equally misguided – that Þórr had, in fact, a plan for negotiating a bloodless resolution, which he was keeping strictly to himself. Unfortunately, any such design did not have the opportunity to be put to the test. In 1209, no less than in other eras, the eagerness of warlords to commit their troops to battle far outstripped their ability to think ahead to how those multitudes of many-men might be extricated once the initial round of carnage were done. Sighvatr had a sound enough military doctrine for initiating hostilities – go in hard, hit ’em with all you’ve got, shock and awe – but a characteristically deficient exit strategy.

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