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* [chieftain] in the North of Iceland, fell in a clash with the followers of Bishop Guðmundr Arason (1161–1237).[1] Kolbeinn's brother, Arnórr, promptly turned to his kinsmen, the Sturlungar, for support (see fig. 1). The for-

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at Norsestock 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.

[1] For orientation in Iceland's medieval history, see Jón Jóhannesson (1974); Byock (1988; 2001); Miller (1990); and, specifically for this period, Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1953); Nordal (1998). The best literary and historical analysis of Kolbeinn's killing is Walgenbach (2007), esp. pp. 28–38.

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Abstract: The words *fjǫlmennr* (here rendered 'many-manned') and *fámennr* ('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: *fjǫlmennr*, *fámennr*, *heljarmaðr*, Family Sagas, *Sturlunga saga*, denotation and connotation, cultural history, gender history, heroism, incitement, status and honour, humiliation, intercession, peace-making.

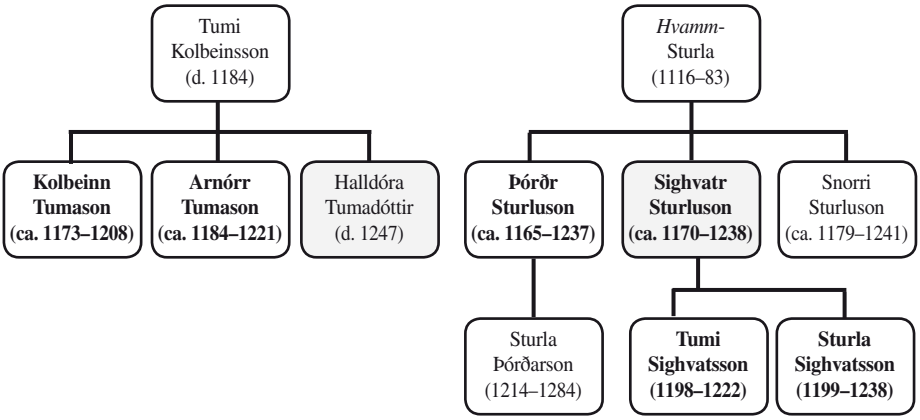

Figure 1. Ásbirningar and Sturlungar, ca. 1208; persons directly involved in the events I discuss are in boldface; the families are linked through Sighvatr Sturluson's marriage to Halldóra Tumadóttir.

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 Þórðr to recruit his support as well, and Þórðr gave him to understand that he was willing, on principle, to take part in the venture. Encouraged, Sighvatr questioned him further:

> '[E]ða **hvé fjölmennr muntu vera?**' 'Með fimmta mann', segir Þórðr. 'Hvat skal mér þú heldr en annarr maðr, ef þú ert svá fámennr?' 'Þú sér þat', segir Þórðr. Sighvatr var þá reiðr ok hljóp á bak, ok skilði þar með þeim. Ok sagði Þórðr svá, at síðan þótti honum aldri hafa orðit frændsemi þeira slík sem áðr.
>
> (*Íslendinga saga* cap. 23 [28], in *StS* 1: 250–51)

> ['But how many men will you have with you?' 'Four others', says Þórðr. 'How will you do me any more good than anyone else, if you have so few men?' 'You'll see', says Þórðr. Sighvatr was then angry and mounted in a

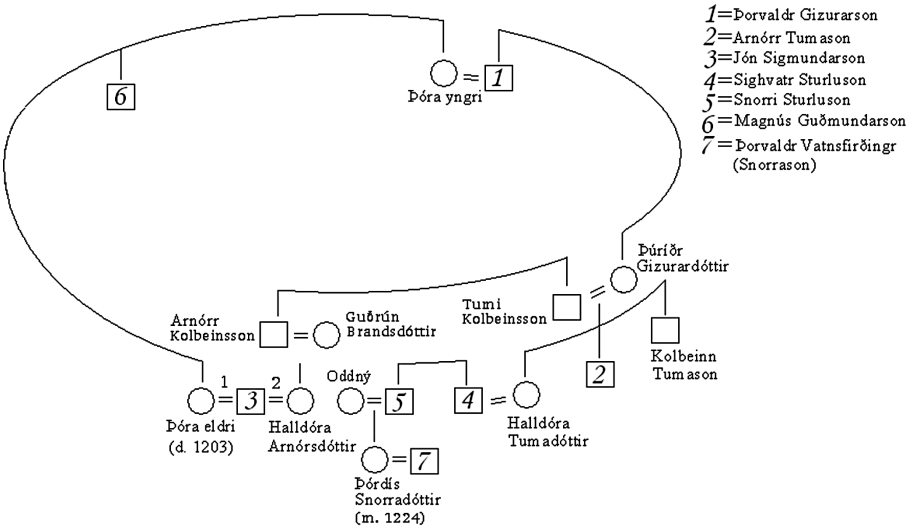

Figure 2. Kinship and affinity relationships among the seven *goðar* [chieftains] who participated in the raid on the See of Hólar, April 1209 (see *Íslendinga saga* capp. 23-24 [28-29], in *StS* 1: 250-54); circles = women, squares = men.

> huff, and they parted in this fashion. And Þórðr 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 Þórðr 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 Þórðr would bring if he were to throw his lot in with those opposed to Bishop Guðmundr. A single, unassuming word, *fjǫlmennr*, 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, *fjölmennur*, 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.[3] 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, *fjǫlmennr* 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.[4]

Variations on Sighvatr's phrase, *hvé fjǫlmennr muntu vera*, recur elsewhere in the medieval Icelandic corpus in the context of mustering troops for martial purposes.[5] 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.[6] As should become apparent in the course of the

[3] Besides *StS*, I have consulted also Örnólfur Thorsson (1988). *Fjölmennur* 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).

[6] I borrow the phrase 'variable ritual' from Poole (2006). Contrast Buc's view of ritual as ossified and monovalent (2001).

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, *fjǫlmennr*, is an adjectival form, transparent enough even to those not fully conversant in Old-Norse–Icelandic (ON-I): the first element, *fjǫl-*, is cognate with German *viel* and Old English *fela*, 'many', while the second, *-mennr* (or its variant, *-meðr*), is akin to English 'man' (cf. ON-I *maðr*, 'person'). *Fjǫlmennr* 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: *fjǫlmenni*, 'a large body of men' (and, by extension, 'the people' or 'the public'), *at fjǫlmenna*, 'to assemble many men' (including creating a multitude *ex nihilo*, hence 'to people'), as well as secondary by-forms, such as adverbial *fjǫlmenniliga*, 'in a multitude', or the adjectives *allfjǫlmennr*, 'with very many men', and *jafnfjǫlmennr*, 'with an equally large following'. The *fjǫlmenn-* 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 *fjǫl-* or *fá-mennr*.) 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 *fjǫlmenn-* and *fámenn-* word families with structurally homologous and semantically synonymous terms, such as *mannfjǫlði*, *mannfár*, etc.

[8] Hans Kuhn's eddic glossary (vol. 2 of Neckel 1962–68) gives no attestations of the *fiǫlmenn-* family, and is likewise silent on *fámenn-* and its byforms. *LP*[2] lists five skaldic instances of *fjǫlmennr*, 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 *Skjd* B[1]: 361 = v. 7

trast, we find ca. 700 attestations of *fjǫlmenn-* 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.[11] Neither word family is frequent in the Norwegian legal corpus, and both are entirely absent from the Icelandic *Grágás*. In contrast, whereas the Icelandic *Hómiliebók* contains seven instances of *fjǫlmenn-* (none of *fámenn-*), Norwegian homilists apparently shun such language altogether.[12] Estimating the frequency of the terms in other corpora (such as the *Riddara* or *Biskupa sögur* [translated romances and Bishops' Sagas], di-

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in *SPSMA* 2[1]: 306 = v. 93 in Snorri's *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* cap. 19, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF 28: 93), to his royal patron, the Norwegian Haraldr *harðráði* (v. 11 in *Skjd* B[1]: 330 = v. 6 in *SPSMA* 2[1]: 48 = v. 115 in *Haralds saga Sigurðarsonar* cap. 43, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF 28: 124), and to the twelfth-century Halldórr *skvaldri* (v. 2:7 in *Skjd* B[1]: 459 = 'Útfarardrápa' v.7 in *SPSMA* 2[2]: 488–89 = v. 195 in *Magnússona saga* cap. 6, in *Heimskringla*, ÍF 28: 246), but none attested prior to the thirteenth century. *LP*[1] adds an instance of *fjǫlmenni* in 'Krossþulur' (ca. 1450–1550, v. 6, in *Íslenzk miðaldakvæði* 1[2]: 238–46, at p. 240). *Fámennr* occurs twice in skaldic poetry, in a verse in *Njáls saga* (ca. 1280) attributed to Gunnarr of Hlíðarendi (v. 20 in Skjd B[2]: 216; ÍF 12: 475) and in the twelfth-century *Plácitusdrápa* (v. 44 in Skjd B[1]: 618 = v. 44 in *SPSMA* 7[1]: 208). There are three attestations of *fiǫlmenn-* in *Landnámabók* (capp. 113, 348 [*S*] / 86, 307 [*H*], ÍF 1: 153, 353) and *Íslendingabók* (cap. 4, ÍF 1: 10), but none of *fámenn-*; the original texts are datable to ca. 1100 and ca. 1125, respectively, but both survive only in redacted manuscripts of the 1200s and later.

[9] This rough gauge is based on Bergljót Kristjánsdóttir 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 kildetekster* 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 kildetekster*, digitized from Linder and Haggson (1869–72). No other *Konunga sögur* are available to me in searchable or comprehensively indexed format.

[11] I find 22 instances in the *Íslendinga sögur* (none in the *þættir*), seven in *Sturlunga saga*, five in the *Fornaldar sögur* and only two in *Heimskringla*.

[12] For legal sources, I have consulted the (generally reliable) indices of *NGL* and *Grágás*, which yield four attestations of *fjǫlmenn-*, four or five of *fámenn-*. It is worth noting, however, that two instances of *fjǫlmenn-* occur in the late-thirteenth-century lawbooks issued by the Norwegian crown for Iceland, *Jarnsíða* (*NGL* 1: 262) and *Jónsbók* (*NGL* 4: 204). For homilies, I have used de Leeuw van Weenen (1993; 2004). The Norwegian homiliary, also ca. 1200, is edited but not indexed: see Indrebø (1931). The passages in the Icelandic codex containing *fjǫlmenn-* are not paralleled in its Norwegian counterpart.

Table 1. Approximate frequency of *-fjǫlmenn-* 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.)

	-fjǫlmenn-	*-fámenn-*
skaldic verse	ca. 6	ca. 2
Landnámabók and *Íslendingabók*	ca. 3	ca. 0
Family Sagas	ca. 290-360	ca. 22
Sturlunga saga	ca. 157	ca. 7
Kings' Sagas (*Heimskringla*)	ca. 130	ca. 2
Legendary Sagas	ca. 85	ca. 5
laws	ca. 4	ca. 5
homilies	ca. 7	ca. 0

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 ongoing *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: *comet ſnemma til kirkio; fyr hótíþer oc fiolmeneþ mioc* [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 Þorbjörg Helgadóttir for making available to me *ONP*'s *fjölmenn-* 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): *ȝelomlice mid rihtum ȝeleafan and mid ȝodum willan to cyrcan cuman* [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 Þorlákr's miracles: *Á Breiðabólstað í Fljótshlið var fjǫlmenni mikit at tíðum Jakobsmessu. Áttu menn þangat at sækja kirkjudagstíðir ok byskupsmessu*

same era, we hear of a king who *lét blása til fjǫlmennrar stefnu* [had (trumpets) blown (to summon) a many-manned meeting] (*Orkneyinga saga* cap. 19, ÍF 34: 39).[15] Several recensions of the *vita* of Jón Ǫgmundarson, 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 fjǫlmennstr ok mestr* [the most many-manned and greatest quarter] in Iceland (*Jóns saga ins Helga* cap. 7, ÍF 15[2]: 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 fjǫlmenni er* [*í Valhǫll*], adding plaintively: *ok mun þó oflítit þykkja þá er úlfrinn 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 með fjǫlmenni, svá sem þar væri konungshirð* [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 Israelite defeat at the hand of the Philistines in which they suffered *mikinn mannskaða i hǫfðingia falli oc fiolmennis* [a great slaughter, the fall of (both) aristocrats and many-men]; *fjǫlmenni* here clearly assumes the sense of *multitudo*, a plebeian horde distinct from the élite few (Unger 1862: 435).[16] In a later fourteenth-century translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, we learn that *gud hafdi fyrirętlat at fiǫlmenna kyn Abrahe 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).[17] Differ-

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[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] (*Þorláks 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).

[16] Cf. *I Samuel* 4:17: *ruina magna facta est in populo* (in *Biblia* 1: 372). The same usage is evinced in *Konungs skuggsiá* of ca. 1250 (1983: 1): *þrottir bænda og fiolmennis þess er land byggir* [the skills of the farmers and many-men who work the land].

[17] For the underlying Latin (*Deus semen Abrahae multiplicare per Isaac praedestinauerat*), 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).[18] 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 fiǫlmenni vera* [was so infirm on his feet that he could not be among many-men] (translating *in publico*), until miraculously healed (*Ambrosius saga byskups* cap. 25, in Unger 1877: 1.48).[19] 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 koma fiaulmennari enn med einn wagn̄* [never come more many-manned than with one wagon] (*DI* 10 [doc. 95 §5]: 117–328, at p. 229).[20]

This sampling illustrates the wide range of meanings words in the *fjǫlmenn-* 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.

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(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 … fjǫlmenntisk ok bygðisk verǫldin* [After Noah … the world was many-manned and settled] (1988: 3).

[18] Cf. 'Eindrida þáttr ok Erlings', where some manuscripts give *mannfiolda* and others *fiolmenni* (in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* 1958–2000: 2.215).

[19] The miracle occurs when the poor man is *bægt af fiolmenninu … ok vard hann undir fotum trodinn af byskupi sialfum* [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 þín þjónosta at tala í fjǫlmenni þat, er ek vil mæla 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*-Grímr forbids the three-year-old Egill from attending a feast *því at þú kannt ekki fyrir þér at vera í fjǫlmenni, þar er drykkjur eru miklar, er þú þykkir ekki góðr viðskiptis, at þú sér ódrukkinn* [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 manns um landit, en ekki með því fjǫlmenni, er lǫg váru 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.[21] 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 þriðjungi, ok er veizlan búin með inum bestu fǫngum; var mikit til aflat þessar veizlu, því at þat var ætlat, at fjǫlmennt 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 *Laxdœla saga* recounts. And

> er at veizlu kemr, er þat sagt, at flestir virðingamenn koma, þeir sem heitit hǫfðu. Var þat svá mikit fjǫlmenni, at þat er sǫgn manna flestra, at eigi skyrti níu hundruð. Þessi hefir ǫnnur veizla fjǫlmennust verit á Íslandi, en sú ǫnnur, er Hjaltasynir gerðu erfi eptir fǫður sinn; þar váru tólf hundruð. (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 *Laxdœla saga* duly notes: *Boði*[*t*] *var allfjǫlmennt, ok kom þó hvergi nær svá mart manna, sem Unnr hafði boðit, fyrir því at Eyfirðingar áttu farveg langan* [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 Eyfirðingar 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: *Þar var fjǫlmennt ok góð skemmtan* [It was many-manned and there was good entertainment] (*Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana* 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 veizlur heima á staðnum* [Lord Bishop Árni also often held many-manned feasts at the See] (*Árna saga biskups* cap. 13, ÍF 17: 22).[22]

The second main context for speaking of *fjǫlmennir* 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 Þórsnesþings á hendr Arnkatli um þræladrápit; fjǫlmenntu þeir báðir til þingsins, ok hélt Snorri fram málum* [In the spring, Snorri had a case against Arnkell prepared for (presentation at) the Þórsnes *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: *Fjǫlmenntu þeir þá mjǫk, hvárirtveggju* [They then many-manned greatly on each side].[23] Society's consensus on the

[22] The same kind of usage is in evidence in *Sturlunga saga*, as well: e.g. *Þorgils 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*, *Þorgils saga skarða* alone exemplifies this usage.

[23] See, e.g. *Vǫðu-Brands þáttr* cap. 4 [11] (ÍF 10: 135). The same idiom is common enough in *Sturlunga saga*, too: e.g., *Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* capp. 15, 16, 22, 31, *Sturlu saga* cap. 9, *Guðmundar saga dýra* capp. 2, 3 (×2), 18, *Íslendinga saga* capp. 34 [39] (×2), 48 [53], 57 [62], 75 [80] (all in *StS* 1: 32, 33, 39, 49, 74, 163, 164–65, 200, 267–68, 298, 310, 333). See also *Hákonar saga góða* cap. 18 and *Magnúss saga ins góða* cap. 29 (both in *Heimskringla*, ÍF 26: 174 and ÍF 28: 46).

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* [*Þorvaldssonum*] *sagt, at Sturla væri í Holti eigi allfámennr, með hundrað manna. Treystust þeir þá eigi at sækja fundinn* [(The sons of Þorvaldr) 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] (*Íslendinga saga* cap. 79 [84], in *StS* 1: 340).

The sagas thus reinforce the commonsensical implications of *fjǫlmenn-* 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 *fjǫlmennr 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 *fjǫlmennr* 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 *fjǫlmenn-* 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*.

> En er dró at þingi, þá hittask þeir Brodd-Helgi ok Geitir, ok **spurði Helgi, hversu fjǫlmennr hann vildi ríða til þingsins**. 'Hví skal nú fjǫlmennari fara', segir hann, 'þar ek á ekki um at vera? Ek mun ríða til ǫndverðs þings ok ríða 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 Þórðr 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: *'Þá er ek fer, munum vit hittask', kvað Helgi, 'ok ríða báðir saman. Ek mun ok með fá menn ríða'. '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 *Íslendinga saga* conversation, in contrast, Sighvatr both expects and hopes for a multiple-digit reply, and is accordingly surprised and disappointed by Þórðr'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 Ólafr *Skotakonung*[*r*] *ok fjǫlmenni hans* [the king of the Scots and his many-men] at Vínheiðr, he famously resorts to subterfuge to inflate the impression his threadbare troops make: *eigi váru menn í inu þriðja hverju tjaldi, ok þó fáir í einu. En er menn Óláfs konungs kómu til þeira, þá hǫfðu þeir fjǫlmennt fyrir framan tjǫldin ǫll, ok náðu þeir ekki inn at ganga; sǫgðu menn Aðalsteins, at tjǫld þeira væri ǫll full af mǫnnum* [in every third tent there were no men, and few in any. But when King Óláfr'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 þú fjǫlmennr jafnan'. Hann réð honum mǫrg ráð, þau er heil váru, ok mæltu þeir til innar mestu vináttu með 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 Njáll himself: *Hann bað Gunnar vera varan um sik … bað hann aldri fara við fámenni ok hafa jafnan vápn sín* [He asked Gunnarr to be careful … asked him never to travel with meagre-men and always to have his weapons (ready)]; *Njáls saga* capp. 59, 60, ÍF 12: 151, 152)

Gunnarr voices no objections to Óláfr's and Njáll'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 *Njáls 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 Þórðarson, the tough-as-nails protagonist of *Flóamanna saga*, announcing his intention to attack a certain Ásgrímr: *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'. Þorgils 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 *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*. Here – having goaded her husband, Bjarni *goði*, into taking decisive action against his upstart neighbour Þorsteinn – mistress Rannveig is alarmed to discover Bjarni arming himself, evidently preparing to set out to face Þorsteinn on his own: ***'Hversu fjǫlmennr skaltu fara?'*** *segir hon.* ***'Ekki mun ek draga fjǫlmenni 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; Þórðr'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 *fjǫlmenni* necessary to render his intervention credible and decisive, Þórðr (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 Þórðr should have aligned his priorities. In *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*, on the other hand, the interplay between the two present speakers and their absent adversary is more complex. In Rannveig's view, Þorsteinn (who has already dispatched three of Bjarni's household men) is a *heljarmaðr*, '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 bravado, 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.)[26] Rannveig and Bjarni, like those matrons whom Sydney Smith once observed haranguing each other from their respective apartments across a narrow Edinburgh alleyway, cannot come to an understanding because they are arguing from different premises (Auden 1946: 23).

A similarly complex dynamic plays out in a minor episode in *Laxdœla saga*, where the sagacious Eiðr advises his great-nephew Þorkell Eyjólfsson, future husband of the redoubtable Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir: *'**Þykki mér þú mikla til hætta**, hversu ferðin teksk, en **at eiga við heljarmann 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 *fjǫlmenni* 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 fjǫlmenni 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 *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*, 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

[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'.

would-be bounty hunter Gísli sets out after the eponymous (and outlawed) protagonist: ***skal ek eigi fjǫlmenni draga at honum*** [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 ráðagørð* [this plan suited Þórðr (the man who egged Gísli on) fine]. Like his solitary analogues, Þorkell in *Laxdœla saga* and Bjarni in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*, however, Gísli soon learns that his rival is mightier than he had reckoned – a veritable fiend, even (*kvað þar sjálfan fjándann fyrir vera* [he said the devil himself was there]). After receiving a thorough thrashing at Grettir's hands, Gísli confesses that [*s*]*á er eldrinn heitastr, er á sjálfum liggr, ok* ***er illt at fásk við heljarmanninn*** [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: *skal ek eigi fjǫlmenni draga at honum* [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 fjǫlmenni 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.)[27] Table 2 details

[27] The point is reinforced by Bárðr *digri* in *Þorvalds þáttr tasalda*, who explains he has prepared a troop in ambush *at* ***ef fjǫlmenni væri dregit at mér****, ætlaða ek til þeira at taka ok njóta liðsmunar* [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 kvœmi tveir eða þrír* [if (only) two or three came at me] (ÍF 9: 125). Bárðr 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 fyrr þurft, at biðjá mér liðs í móti einum.… [E]n þó vil ek eigi at þú rennir optar á mik, trollit, þó at þú nefndisk Þorvaldr … en þó mun vera, at þú skulir maðr heita, ok munt vera heldr fjǫlkunnigr* [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).

Table 2. Idiomatic variations in the 'how many-manned will you ride?' motif.

	Interlocutors and **saga reference**			
	Sighvatr Sturluson and Þórðr Sturluson (*Íslendinga saga*)	*Brodd*-Helgi and Geitir (*Vápn-firðinga saga*)	Rannveig and Bjarni (*Þorsteins þáttr stangarhǫggs*)	Eiðr and Þorkell (*Laxdœla saga*)
question 1: how many?	hvé **fjölmennr** muntu vera?	spurði … hversu **fjǫlmennr** hann vildi ríða	Hversu **fjǫlmennr** skaltu fara?	far þú við marga menn, svá at þú eigir allt undir þér
question 2: why so few?	Hvat skal mér þú … ef þú ert svá **fámennr**?			
reply: not too many (or else how would I win any prestige from this?)	Með fimmta mann	Hví skal nú **fjǫlmennari** fara … þar ek á ekki um at vera?	Ekki mun ek draga **fjǫlmenni** at Þorsteini	Þat þykki mér engi frami … at draga **fjǫlmenni** at einum manni
caution: he may be alone, but he's no ordinary fellow			Gerðu eigi þat … at hætta þér undir vápn heljarmannsins	Þykki mér þú mikla til hætta … at eiga við heljarmann slíkan

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 leyna; en veit ek frændsemi með ykkr Þorleiki; en svá em ek eptir hrossunum kominn, at ek ætla honum þau aldri síðan; hefi ek ok þat efnt, sem ek hét honum á þingi, at **ek hefi ekki með fjǫlmenni farit** eptir hrossunum'. Hrútr segir: '**Engi er þat frami**, þóttú takir hross í brott, en Þorleikr liggi í rekkju sinni ok sofi; efnir þú þat þá bezt … ef þú hittir hann, áðr þú ríðr ór heraði 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 *þing*, 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

Table 2. Continued.

Interlocutors and **saga reference**					
Gísli and Þórðr (*Grettis saga*)	Bárðr *digri* and Þorvaldr *tasaldi* (*Þorvalds þáttr tasalda*)	Eldgrímr and Þor leikr / Hrútr (*Laxdœla saga*)	Þorvaldr and *Hœnsa*-Þórir (*Hœnsa-Þóris saga*)	Snorri and Þórðr *Vatnsfirðingar* Þorvaldssynir (*Íslendinga saga*)	Hafr and Sighvatr Sturluson (*Íslendinga saga*)
		þetta sumar mun ek fara … bjóð mér engan liðsmun		hvárt er Sturla væri fyrir **fjölmennari** …	
			Hví ertu svá **fámennr**?	… eða **fámennari**	Hví er goðinn svá **fámennr**?
skal ek eigi **fjǫl-menni** draga at honum	ef **fjǫlmenni** væri dregit at mér	Engi er þat frami … ek hefi ekki með **fjǫlmenni** farit	Ek vissa, at þik myndi eigi lið skorta		Ek vissa eigi, at ek þyrfta nú manna við
er illt at fásk við heljarmanninn … kvað þar sjálfan fjándann fyrir vera	ek hefi eigi fyrr þurft, at biðjá mér liðs í móti einum … en þó vil ek eigi at þú rennir optar á mik, trollit				

their owner's will (‘*þetta sumar mun ek fara at sjá hrossin, hvárr okkar sem þá hlýtr þau at eiga þaðan í frá*’ [‘this summer I'll come view the horses, whoever of us two should happen then to own them thereafter’]) and Þorleikr 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, ÍF 5: 104, 103). Þorleikr's stipulation acts as the equivalent of Rannveig's question or Eiðr's counsel, albeit in a positive register: rather than criticise Eldgrímr for failing to load the dice in his favour, Þorleikr challenges him to play fair. By showing up alone, Eldgrímr considers himself to have given the traditional reply: his *ek hefi ekki með fjǫlmenni farit eptir hrossunum* parallels Bjarni's *ekki mun ek draga fjǫlmenni at Þorsteini*. Yet Hrútr is quick to deflate Eldgrímr's pretension to be acting gallantly: *engi er þat frami*, he says (echoing Þorkell's disavowal of bringing *fjǫlmenni* to bear on Grímr), since – with his rival snoring blissfully in bed – the odds Eldgrímr gives Þorleikr 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 – Eldgrímr with Þorleikr in the first round, Eldgrímr with Hrútr 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 Eldgrímr, 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 Þórðr's accountability and valour. Sighvatr asks *hvé fjölmennr muntu vera* not in order to protect his brother from himself but to probe (and prod) Þórðr's sense of family solidarity. Accordingly, his deployment of the motif serves not to warn Þórðr against overly ambitious self-confidence but to berate him for an underdeveloped sense of vengeance. To Sighvatr's ears, Þórðr's *með 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-Þóris saga*, for instance, a similarly dubious question serves to characterize the eponymous villain succinctly. *Hœnsa*-Þórir 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 Þórir 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 mælti: '****Hví ertu svá fámennr****, Þórir?'*

Hann svarar: 'Ek vissa, at þik myndi eigi lið skorta' [Þorvaldr 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: Þorvaldr, 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 Þórðr Þorvaldssynir, 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 vápnum bæinn, 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 Þorvaldr, 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

[28] On the deliberation between an attack with conventional weapons and one with fire, cf. *Njáls saga* capp. 77, 128 (ÍF 12: 188, 327–28).

[29] *Fjǫlmennr* and *fámennr* are similarly juxtaposed in ostentatious indifference in *Hrólfs saga kraka ok kappa hans* cap. 40: *Aðils konungr sagði: 'Þat sé ek, at þit farið ekki at mannvirðingu í ókunnu landi, eða hví hefir Hrólfr mágr ekki fleira lið?' Svipdagr sagði: 'Þat sé ek, at þú sparir ekki at sitja á svikráðum við Hrólf konung ok menn hans, ok eru þar lítil undr, **hvárt hann ríðr 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 Hrólfr not travel with a larger retinue?' Svipdagr said: 'This I can see, that you don't hold back on plotting treason against King Hrólfr 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 *goði*'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:

> sneri hann á móti þeim ok brá at hendi sér kápunni. Þeir Hafr riðu at túngarðinum, ok váru engar kveðjur. Hafr spurði: '**Hví er goðinn svá fámennr?**' 'Ek vissa eigi, at ek þyrfta nú manna við', segir Sighvatr. Þeir Hafr horfðust á um hríð, áðr þeir sneru á brott, 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 *goði* 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.][30]

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 *fjǫlmenni*, 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 unidimensional 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

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[30] Hafr's lineage, although not precisely known, was not insignificant: we learn elsewhere that Einarr *skemmingr*, his brother, was related to Bishop Guðmundr (see *Arons saga* cap. 5, in *StS* 2: 241, 311 n.5[1]). 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 Þórðarson or Gunnarr of Hlídarendi, must be heroic rather than destitute. Sighvatr himself in his 1209 spat with Þórðr (like Þorvaldr *goði* 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 anoemic 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 (Ciklamini 1983; Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 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 *fjǫlmenni*-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 Eldgrímr'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

Laxdœla saga.[31] It seems that this is what Þórðr Sturluson had planned to do in the encounter with Bishop Guðmundr, as well. At the outset of the dialogue between the brothers, Þórðr 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 þú vill', segir Sighvatr, 'eða hvé fjölmennr 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 Þórðr 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 Þórðr, have as big a say as the force you are willing to commit? For Sighvatr, aggression is the natural idiolect on every occasion, and *fjǫlmenni* the necessary vehicle for articulating it; Þórðr, on the other hand, is more interested in *ráð* [counsel], and hopes his words will carry the day when push comes to shove. Þórðr's enigmatic reply to Sighvatr's

[31] A complementary idea underlies Þorgils's words, spoken in 1121 on the brink of yet another abortive clash with Hafliði's following: *Þat veit ek glöggt, ef þar er svá mikit fjölmenni sem sagt er, at þar muni þeir margir, er í mínum flokki myndi sik kjósa heldr, ef þeir þyrði, ok munu 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 munu ok þar margir, er fagna myndi því, ef annarr tveggja okkar létist, en hirða myndi þeir aldri, hvárr á brott kæmist* [There will also be many there who will be glad if either one of us (sc. Þorgils 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 trausta menn … ok mjök örugga, at hverr mun heldr vilja falla um þveran annan en mér verði neitt, ok munum vér af 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] (*Þorgils saga ok Hafliða* cap. 23, in *StS* 1: 40–41). Þorgils is essentially saying that within any *fjǫlmenni* – his own troop excepted – some *fámenni* may inevitably be found who resemble Bjarni, Þorkell or Þórðr. Cf. also *Sturlu 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 Þorleifr beiskaldi bað hann eigi stefna mönnum í svá mikinn váða, at aldri leystist, sem ván var á, ef svá mikit fjölmenni skyldi berjast* [Einarr leapt up and urged (that they should) attack. But Þorleifr *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 *fjǫlmenni* 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 *goði* 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 *Hœnsa*-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 *goði* 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* capp. 139, 145 (ÍF 12: 372–73, 402–8), *Guðmundar saga dýra* cap. 3, and *Íslendinga 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 Þórðr 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 Þórðr 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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