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# Teaching the Legal Culture of Icelandic Sagas in a First-Year Writing Seminar

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## Abstract

Reading Icelandic Sagas against a medieval legal background in a First-Year Writing Seminar is a useful way to teach students the bones of academic argument. When the classroom is transformed into a courtroom through re-enactments of the legal struggles at the Althing, all students participate, and some exploratory students sign up for English and creative writing.

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Teaching Icelandic Sagas in a first-year writing seminar is a good option for a medievalist at a small regional university, because such a course can introduce students, who tend to come from engineering and health sciences, to the humanities via academic arguments. Icelandic Sagas showcase the triumphs and shortcomings of humanity and are, likely for that reason, already quite appealing to the diverse population of students at my institution, some of whom are the first in their family to go to college (University of the Pacific 2024). At my university, some of the students in a first-year writing seminar are already interested in the Vikings found in popular culture (computer games, movies, etc.); the rest can be sold on Icelandic Sagas as “the literature of a democratic community,” the kind of tight-knit community where everyone knows their neighbors’ business and where conflict can have explosive consequences (Herman 2021).

Since first-year writing seminars are a great recruiting tool for our Creative Writing Minor, I make sure to underscore that the sagas “represent the best training for an aspiring novelist: how to build a plot, memorable but also believable characters, and a narrative that reveals something profound about the characters but also about the audience of readers or listeners” (Herman 2021).<sup>1</sup> A fiction writer myself, I often return during the semester to discussing the creative writing aspects of Icelandic Sagas in addition to teaching students how to craft an academic argument. As a result, some exploratory students have declared an English or a Creative Writing Minor (a feat at a university where some humanities majors report being looked down upon by professional students).

Given that student interest in Vikings mainly comes from popular culture, I start the class with an episode from *Norsemen*, a TV parody of Viking life written and directed by Jon Helgaker and Jonas Torgersen (2016), in order to start a conversation about what we think we know about Viking life. Here, I caution students about the liberties that popular culture—whether in jest or in earnest—sometimes takes with medieval history by steering audiences into simplifications and/or generalizations, most importantly about violence and the threat it poses to a community. Recent work on the dangers of misreading medieval men—for instance, by Will Cerbone (2019)—has continued a longstanding medievalist tradition of setting the record straight. I title my course provocatively “Vikings, Sagas, and the Law,” and we begin by unpacking the term Viking, with its connotations of savagery, primitiveness, and injustice.

For this conversation about how we know what we know, I draw on student familiarity with scientific research. First, I point out that popular culture is misleading about other fields, too. Here, I like to offer factually incorrect examples that draw in the mathematicians and the biologists: Pythagoras never actually formulated his famous theorem (see Ratner 2009), and ostriches do not bury their head in the sand when they are scared (see Corney n.d.). Then, I lead a brief discussion asking students why we generalize, and we discover that generalizations are a tool to understanding the world around us by extrapolating information from previous experiences to make sense of new situations (see Taylor et al. 2021).

Our ideas about the Middle Ages need to be addressed early on in the course because, when they are based on faulty data, they become logical fallacies that undermine academic arguments (and a writer’s ethos). Moreover, I would like students to develop some expertise about medieval cultures

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<sup>1</sup> See also novelist Jane Smiley’s blog, “Iceland Made Me.”

(after all, they spend a lot of money on tuition while popular culture is mostly free). I emphasize the value of expertise by discussing a few sections from Thomas Nichols' book, *The Death of Expertise*, which offers a trenchant critique of anti-intellectualism in the United States in the age of social media, and which ties well into our complementary library session, during which our humanities librarian teaches students what is reliable, scholarly information and how to find it.

The first episode of *Norsemen* in Season 1, "The Homecoming," introduces what our focus will be with the sagas: a legal case. In this instance, the case is settled with violence. One returning raider challenges a peaceful farmer for the latter's farmstead and his much-too-willing wife. The farmer is staggered at the injustice of the raider's proposal, who claims that the winner (by which he means, the bigger bully) should take it all, including the life of the loser. Sadly, the community cheers the bully on and drinks on the success of the competition. The farmer, a peaceful fellow who abhors violence, tries to even out the odds and save his life by trickery. Unbeknownst to anyone, he purchases a poison in which he dips his weapon. But he doesn't get to use it: the bully splits him in two with his first blow, and everyone drinks to the bully's union with the farmer's wife and the decedent's property.

This episode makes for a good contrast with our first reading, *Njal's Saga*, in which a legal case is also settled by the threat of violence. Where *Norsemen* moves straight to violence, the saga dramatizes the reasons for it. We begin with some background on Icelandic law, which I draw from William Ian Miller (2014) and *The Viking Age* by Angus Sommerville and Andrew McDonald (2019), now in its third edition with its expanded section on women. Later in the course, when I discuss outlawry in *Grettir's Saga*, I complement Miller's book with some passages from *Laws of Early Iceland* (Dennis et al 2014). But I don't simply give students the legal background to the trial. Instead, I foster their curiosity by asking them to become part of the community of Icelanders at the Althing [Iceland's First Parliament and the Icelandic term for "general meeting"] and decide the trials themselves. What questions about Viking law and culture do they need answered in order to ensure a fair legal outcome? (Here I discuss how laws need to align to perceived ideals of fairness in a given culture; otherwise, people tend to disobey them).

Pairing Icelandic Sagas with legal documents can be problematic if the instructor is not clear on what constitutes fact and what fiction. The instructor must underscore that the sagas are not primary source documents or transparent reflections, or even contemporary to the Viking Age. Because the sagas are meditations on an earlier moment from later, post-commonwealth Iceland, there is another wrinkle in how one might detect slippages or reframings between what we know about Viking culture and law and how their ancestors represent it. In a course on medieval culture, the instructor usually needs to ask themselves which of these kinds of knowledge should guide students in their reenactments of the trials. In a first-year writing course, however, such rationale might supersede the main goal of the course, which in our iteration at Pacific is mostly about introducing students to academic writing (with any cultural information as a bonus). To simplify matters, I have my students watch several episodes from the documentary film *Ferðalok* or *Journey's End: Are the Viking Sagas True?* directed by Ragnar Hansson (2013), so that students get a good idea of the intricate blend of fact and fiction in the sagas by listening to Icelandic experts who attempt to reconstruct the world of the sagas using both historical artifacts and literary references (*Euro But Not Trash* 2016). I encourage them to use what they've learned about Viking culture and law to reenact the trials.

My goal is to get students to ask questions that allow them to build a base for judging the conflict between Mord and Hrut, which is at the heart of the case in *Njal's Saga*. This goal is harder than it might sound; sometimes the students don't even know what kinds of questions to ask. Whenever they don't ask questions, for whatever reason, I probe to make sure their perceived knowledge about Icelandic culture and law corresponds to our historical knowledge, which is of course not something static but always evolving. As an example, let us turn to the first of three trials we are discussing in my course and in this essay.

The acrimonious legal battle between Hrut and Mord starts, in fact, with a cordial understanding when Mord agrees to give Hrut his only daughter, Unn, in marriage. Many of students' questions concern Unn's dowry and the sharing of the marriage property, a sharing conditioned here by the married couple's ability to produce offspring. Students also wonder about marriage arrangements, especially after Hrut uses the Icelandic expression *kaupa dóttur* "buying a daughter" in relation to Unn (Icelandic Saga Database, n.d.). The Icelandic Saga Database, which is free and therefore popular with students, facilitates this discussion, because it allows us to switch quickly between the English and Icelandic versions to check on the accuracy of an expression; this strategy teaches undergraduates the importance of going *ad fontes* in pursuing historical truth. My own knowledge of Icelandic is under construction, but I am fluent in German, and so I can find my place in the text easily and show students how to use Google Translate to make sure of a particular wording. I also spend some time discussing the disadvantages of using only translations in light of the old adage *traduttore traditore*, but also in light of their own experiences with translation because many of my students are bilingual.

When considering the arranged marriage between Hrut and Unn, which later blows up into legal acrimony, students often wonder why Mord, a celebrated lawyer, does not make a better marriage deal with Hrut, especially after Hrut lets Mord set the conditions for the marriage. Unn is supposed to wait for Hrut for three years until he returns from abroad with his inheritance (she is therefore losing three years of fertility and market value, so to speak, at a time when life expectations were abbreviated compared to ours). There is no guarantee that the returned Hrut will be the same as the one who departed (he could die, be maimed, or be otherwise incapacitated). And indeed, the marriage contract proves to be bad for both of them. While Hrut returns from Norway richer than he departed, he is a changed man: He cannot have children with Unn because of a curse that Queen Gunnhild put on him. Therefore, the newlyweds cannot share their property equally. If in arranging the marriage Mord hoped to leave Unn with a larger amount of money than she put into the marriage settlement, or that he could leave her, he deceived himself. Unn can actually inherit all of her father's money as she is his only daughter (Schulman 1997, 312).

Students are baffled and often straight-out embarrassed that sensitive matters such as Hrut's temporary impotence and the dissolution of his marriage are not settled confidentially. Instead, his private business is so widely talked about that he becomes the butt of children's jokes. After advising his daughter to leave without telling her husband and come back to him, Mord adds insult to injury by suing Hrut and unilaterally imposing a fine. When they agreed to the marriage contract, Mord put down sixty hundreds for Unn's dowry and Hrut thirty hundreds. After the marriage's dissolution, Mord wants the whole ninety hundreds back although he doesn't have any legal right to Hrut's thirty hundreds. As William Ian Miller (2014) points out,

Mord has offended community norms in at least two ways. The first was to have taken his claim to law in the first place. [...]. There is another problem with publicizing this case and it further helps explain why the assembled people are hostile to Mord. [...] To state his claim, Mord insults Hrut sexually. This is perilously close to *níð*, a sexual defamation, in this case of an honorable man (29–30).

To decide the case, students ask for clarification about Icelandic divorce proceedings, medieval masculinity, and medieval emotions; they often express their amazement that Hrut remains calm, only raising his eyebrows at Unn's departure, but then becomes incensed at the Althing where he challenges Mord to open combat. Here, one can draw on the latest research in medieval emotion and masculinity studies (see Rikhardsdottir 2018 and Evans and Hancock 2020). I find that reading passages from scholarly arguments with students in class, rather than just telling them what the research says, helps students acclimatize themselves not only to the structure of an academic argument but also to questions of voice and ethos within their own writing so that they sound increasingly unbiased and reliable to their readers.

Students find that deciding Hrut's case fairly is more difficult than they imagined (though using William Miller's book to answer their questions is of great help here). While some of them point out that Hrut's temporary impotence is a direct result of his *olde daunce* with queen Gunnhild, others are more forgiving because they view Gunnhild's demand for sex as a medieval case of sexual harassment. They point out that she has all the power and Hrut has none, especially because the king, her son, listens to her advice, so there is no higher power Hrut can appeal to. They also note Hrut's vulnerable position: he is a foreigner in need of friends and support, which Gunnhild offers but with strings attached. Equally, one cannot dismiss Mord's suit by just faulting him for his avarice. Some students are indeed put off by Mord's greed, but others wonder if the fine he imposes on Hrut is really all that unfair given that Unn has lost five years of fertility by the time she declares herself divorced from Hrut. Many students are aggrieved that Unn comes out as the real loser in the end. Because of her father's avarice and bad contracts, she's not only lost her time but also her dowry, which Hrut retains as compensation for Mord's insults.

In addition to teaching students about medieval Icelandic culture through their own questions, my goal is to encourage students to consider two counters to their main argument. Since this is a writing class, creating good counterarguments is at its epicenter, to which we return time and time again. Ultimately, it's not as important what they decide at the trial as long as they seriously consider how their arguments might be invalidated (and how to respond to counters in real time).

I am lucky that these first-year writing seminars at the University of the Pacific give so much latitude to the instructor: instructors choose the course topic, and students can then select the topic that best matches their interests. The only requirement is to prepare students for academic writing, and so this format allows me to teach them what I think is most valuable: responding to counterarguments as a way of participating in academic conversation and the intellectual life of the university. Of course, in other institutional contexts, composition may foreground different skills, such as adapting style and voice to a variety of rhetorical situations. To better involve the science-minded students, I draw parallels between the method of making an argument in the humanities and the

scientific method. While humanities and sciences might have different standards of truth (I am thinking here specifically of Kierkegaard's contention that truth is subjectivity [Healy and Chervin 2019]), the method of arriving at truth is comparable. As Angela O'Callaghan (2002) reminds us, "scientists make hypotheses that they want to disprove in order that they may prove the working assumption describing the observed phenomena. This is done by declaring the statement or hypothesis as falsifiable." Similarly, I explain, an academic argument needs to be falsifiable (if it can't be argued against, then it's not an argument). Students can make their arguments stronger by developing sound counterarguments and then trying to disprove them. This strategy can help students separate themselves from sometimes dearly held opinions and think about a subject from someone else's (a reader's) perspective. Unless they respect their readers by anticipating and answering the readers' questions in their argument, they stand little chance of persuading them.

Many beginning writers think that making the same point again and again will persuade their audience, but I explain that this strategy merely annoys their readers because it makes them feel foolish, as if they couldn't get what the writer is saying in the first place. Instead, I suggest they entertain counters, refute them, and return back to the thesis at least two times during their argument (and I show them how to do it with examples from current research on Icelandic Sagas).

Often, students are stumped when they hit on a counterargument that is better than their original thesis. When I advise them to use the old thesis as a refutable counter and the old counter as the new thesis, they are taken aback that this is allowed. My goal is to free them of such rigidities of thinking and teach them to argue from several perspectives; the class trials flesh out this strategy when students are confronted in real time with arguments that invalidate their points and to which they must respond on the spot.

If the trial of Mord and Hrut is meant to make students curious about Icelandic culture and prompt them to ask questions about Icelandic law, the next two trials are more structured (one example of trial preparation is detailed in the appendix). I set up our fictional trials by having students each pick a saga character out of a hat. This is the character they have to embody at the Althing and speak for in an argument that deploys counters and later ties into their papers (some students choose not to write on the trials, and that's fine because the speeches at the trial are graded separately). If this were a class on medieval literature, I would put more effort into reconstructing the Althing protocol from narratives and primary sources. Because this is a writing class, however, the strength of the argument wins (and any knowledge students acquire about the medieval Icelandic culture is a bonus).

Sometimes, students are unhappy with their draw and initially tell me they cannot embody a character that goes against their values. This is especially true for the next trial, in which the saga characters have to decide whether, as Icelanders, they should or should not adopt Christianity. But once I explain that they are not representing themselves, but their character as if they were taking part in a theatre play, things tend to fall into place (last time I taught this course, a Muslim student became the leader of the pro-Christian faction after some hesitation, and so I can say that students do tend to get absorbed in their characters and arguments). At the end of each trial, they vote for or against based on the strength of the arguments they hear (one could also assign in class an accompanying reflection exercise asking students why they voted a particular way, or what arguments changed their minds).

Arguments can get pretty heated at the trial, with factions sometime heckling each other, but fun is important for keeping students engaged. I encourage them to think of the developments at Althing



as courtroom dramas of the Middle Ages (though held outside, not inside a court). Ármann Jakobsson's (2020) essay on climactic speeches is very useful as a background to helping students craft their own speeches at the trial.

There is a class conversation preceding every trial. I ask students what they think are the similarities and differences between the saga characters' way of life and Christian practices as detailed in *Njal's Saga*. A major sore point for students is Icelanders' feuding and the damage it does to the fabric of their society. They hope the Christian dictum of "turning the other cheek" might help curb these feuding tendencies. I point out that decent, peaceful people do not need curbing in either Christianity or paganism; that *Njal's Saga* is dedicated to a lawyer who serves the community in a quasi-Christian spirit, often offering free advice to those who can't pay, and urging people to enter peaceful settlements. I also point out the centrality of Njal's friendship to Gunnar, a martial hero of the highest caliber who abhors violence while worrying that his unwillingness to kill emasculates him. But then I also discuss what Janice Hawes (2008) has called "the monstrosity of heroism" and urge students to show compassion to young men who see themselves trapped in an infernal machine of honor and revenge (see Árnason 1991 and Miller 1997). As a result, I receive several smart papers each year discussing the concept of Icelandic honor as a prison, or the many versions of medieval Icelandic masculinity (including toxic masculinity and the masculinity of women).

Some students express the hope that Christianity might remedy this situation, but this hope is dashed when, after the death of Njal, the prospects for justice and peace in the saga become bleaker. Here, Bill Miller's (2014) chapter on "Conversion and the Genius of the Law" is very helpful in setting up the Althing trial on whether Icelanders should adopt Christianity or not. Since his writing is so eminently readable, we look at select passages in class, especially those that provide counters (for either side). Still, some students wonder, in the vein of Nietzsche, whether Christianity doesn't turn people from warriors into victims (the killing of Hoskuld the Godi, who dies like a Christian martyr by forgiving his assassins is often cited as an evidence).

Students who are concerned about social justice in other areas of their lives find the erasure of Icelandic cultural practices particularly troubling, and they have a hard time defending the Christian practices outlined in *Njal's Saga*, practices that promise peace but commence with violence (the hostage situation in Norway, the murdering of several dissenters, etc.). One student even wondered if Njal's admonition, "with law shall our land be built up and settled, and with lawlessness wasted and spoiled" (Icelandic Saga Database, n.d.), doesn't also refer to giving up Icelandic customs for Christian practices—in a landscape as tough as medieval Iceland they wonder whether the Christian prohibition on consuming horse meat is viable during periods of famine.

The killings of Sorcerer-Hedinn and Weatherlid—the Skald are often debated as symbols of cultural erasure. The students who embody these two characters can be particularly vocal. Here, I should mention that during the trials the dead can argue with the living (I borrowed this idea from *Laxdaela Saga*). While the dead are not allowed to comment on the verity of Valhalla or the Christian Paradise, they can goad the living to right wrongs in their names, take sides, and get assurances that justice will be done.

A good introduction to Christianity in Iceland should draw on artifacts to explain the initial blending of Christianity and paganism. Students are particularly surprised at a picture of the *Viking Jesus*, displayed in the National Museum in Copenhagen, in which Christ is depicted as a Viking king

simply attached to the cross, with no signs of the Passion on his fully clothed body. In addition to class trials, I try to immerse students in the culture in any way I can, for instance by showing examples of Viking art (here Graham-Campbell's [2021] book is very useful) and taking them to print their favorites on our 3D printer. The Thor hammer/cross casting molds from northern England are particularly popular. I also encourage them to play Hnefatafl (Viking Chess), and comment on their experience (students often report that by playing defense, they increase their chances of winning, a statement that goes against the senseless violence argument and teaches them something about strategy). Of great help is Christopher Abram's (2011) book on Norse gods; he points out how hard it is to pin down concrete knowledge about the state of paganism in any one place and time, while explaining how dynamic and diverse paganism is (the same goes for Icelandic Christianity, too, whose practices differ from the Continent).

Because we read passages from *Edda* (Orchard 2011) and the law books alongside the sagas, students develop a good understanding of Old Norse morality and culture and its similarities to and difference from Christian societies. I encourage them to focus not only on differences but also similarities between the two cultures as evidenced by Icelanders' communal spirit, hospitality, and generosity, with violence as a last resort. Interestingly, students tend to think of *Njal's Saga* as much closer to historical fact than *Grettir's Saga* or *The Saga of Ref the Sly*—the three sagas we read in this course.

After the trial of Hrut and Mord and the trial on the adoption of Christianity, we prepare for the last trial of the course: whether Grettir deserves to be welcomed back into society after almost two decades of outlawry (legally the maximum sentence for full outlawry). We focus on a moral and not a legal question because legally he would have done his time had he not been unlawfully killed. So, we imagine a scenario where he is pardoned early and stays alive.

I choose *Grettir's Saga* not only because Grettir is somewhat of a national hero but also because, as a character, he is sometimes so hard to empathize with. (I happen to believe that the humanities should help students build character, with empathy, justice, and compassion as cardinal virtues.) Nevertheless, Grettir's unfair demise just a few months before he would have become lawful again never fails to turn him into a sympathetic underdog with some students.

We start the preparation for Grettir's trial with an ethical question: Should people of exceptional ability be held to a different standard than other people? There is no doubt Grettir is exceptional—his almost superhuman martial ability as well as his intellectual capabilities (he often composes verses to set the record straight about his martial feats) present him to the reader as Gunnar and Njal rolled into one. When students argue that Njal is far wiser, I remind them that Njal also resorts to trickery—for instance when he teaches Gunnar how to legally trick people so he can get Unn's inheritance back, or when he messes up everyone's cases so he can propose a fifth court of equity presided over by his adoptive son, Hoskuld, who cannot get married to the ambitious Hildigunn unless he becomes a *goði* [chieftain]. Njal also commits grave errors of judgment, for instance when he demonstrates that his love for his adoptive son is greater than his affection for his natural sons, an error that causes his sons to resent Hoskuld and makes them more susceptible to Mord's machinations.

When discussing the issue of exceptionalism, I emphasize that this question is not about equity or whether people should be treated the same by the law for the same crimes. The full force of law has already been applied to Grettir. Condemned to full outlawry by the community, he has not only

survived but made a name for himself—an impossible feat for most people. (To discuss outlawry from all angles, not just as a legal punishment, we read Marion Poilvez’s [2019] chapter).

Grettir’s trial is a re-examination of the crime for which he’d been made a full outlaw— burning a house down by accident and causing several people to lose their lives—weighted against Grettir’s contributions to the community’s welfare since his condemnation, for instance as a land cleanser. Could he be a tragic hero? Could he suffer from bad luck? (For an examination of these questions see Sommer 2017). All these conversations inform the trial, which is situated in time just before Grettir’s untimely death. The outcome of the trial is usually that Grettir is welcomed back into the community against the advice of the students embodying the farmers from whom Grettir steals food to stay alive and of his previous victims returning as ghosts. Students often find that he’s done his time. His trials and tribulations as an outlaw supersede his volatile temper, his cruelty to animals, and his arrogance. Grettir’s mental struggles (especially his fear of darkness and being alone acquired during one of his episodes of land cleansing) prompt some students to view his earlier transgressions from a mental health (or bad luck) perspective. More importantly, students recognize Grettir’s fallibility and humanity as well as the dangers of making villains or heroes out of complex characters, whose struggles approximate those of real people.

By posing their own research questions and looking for answers, first-year students recognize that scholarship in the humanities, like scholarship in the sciences, is geared towards the discovery of truth, and truth requires weighing multiple perspectives against one another. Instead of being senseless, as often portrayed in the media, the violence in the sagas always has an explanation or purpose. Given the lack of executive powers to enforce laws and settlements, engaging in violence is a common fate in medieval Iceland, especially when bad actors are involved, who behave selfishly and dishonorably. Instead of mere destroyers, some of the saga characters are also builders and makers— of law (*Njal*), of ships (*Ref the Sly*), and of poetry (*Grettir*). By imagining themselves into those characters, understanding their reasons, and performing their arguments, first-year students can build on their curiosity to learn the fuller story of medieval Icelandic culture, and make the intellectual transition from popular culture to budding scholarship.

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## Appendix

1<sup>st</sup> Trial – How to Prepare for the Trial on Whether Icelanders Should Adopt Christianity: You have several resources to prepare your character and embody his views, mannerism, and even his way of clothing—some characters love the color red, and you may want to wear something red for the trial. What you, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century person living in the US, think about Christianity is irrelevant. Imagine what your character might think and why. It is crucial for you, in preparation for your papers, to learn how to disprove your arguments and construct counterarguments, and the trials in this class help you with that process. As you prepare your arguments, you must think of at least **two counters** to your argument. What/How might your opponents argue against you?

1. My Notes to *Njal's Saga* (Canvas)
2. Summary of *Njal's Saga* by Characters (Canvas)
3. Plot Summary, Maps, and Notes from the Penguin edition of *Njal's Saga* (pdf)
4. Name etymology if relevant: <https://www.nordicnames.de/>
5. If you are dead at the time of the trial, you will be wearing a mask that I will provide. As the embodiment of your character, think of your past friendships and enmities when you argue. Since Christianity does not impact your life in any way, you are there to support your friends and take vengeance on their enemies. You may play the role anyway you like, or just become a Daugr: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draugr>. You are not

allowed, however, to tell us about Hel/Hell or Valholl/Paradise. If asked, just play dumb.

6. If you are **not** in class at the time of the trial, you must still post your written work online by the deadline unless you have written documentation of your troubles.

7. The fun comes from making alliances ahead of the Althing, and so please establish a pro-Christianity and an anti-Christianity faction ahead of time. You want your peers to come to your aid when you get stuck with your argument.

Fill out the form below and post it on Canvas by the deadline:

Your Character's Name:

Describe the character: who s/he is, kinship, distinguishing qualities, etc.

Your Character's Allies:

Your Character's Enemies:

Quote two passages from the saga that best showcase your character's temperament, mode of presentation, attitude, etc.

Write down three goals for your character with respect to the trial (why would it be in their own best interest to be Christianized or not?):

Write down a speech of 700 words (double-spaced, 12-point font) that your character will give regarding Christianity. Whenever the conversation stagnates, your character will be called upon to give this speech at the Althing, and so write it colloquially, like an address to your peers, and not like a formal paper. State the side you are on, explain why, imagine counters to your thesis (some may argue that...), and then refute them (but this is why my position benefits us more...). Finally, give us a so-what of your position. So, what if you are pro or against Christianity? What does your position accomplish for the community? Since this is a tight-knit society, you'll do best framing your argument for the common good.