

# Mandom och mödom

Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet  
på det senmedeltida Island

*with an English Summary*

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## Abstract

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TITLE *Mandom och mödom: Sexualitet, homosocialitet och aristokratisk identitet på det senmedeltida Island*

ENGLISH TITLE *Manhood and Maidenhood: Sexuality, Homosociality, and Aristocratic Identity in Late Medieval Iceland*

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The purpose of this study is to show how political and sexual strategies interacted when the Icelandic elite was reorganized in the late Middle Ages. During the years 1262 through 1264, the Icelanders agreed to pay tax to the Norwegian king and thus Iceland evolved into a more organized and hierarchical society. Representing the Norwegian crown, the Icelandic chieftains developed a stronger aristocratic identity. Their mutual understanding grew and so did their sense of being members of a chivalry.

Emphasizing certain sexual norms was a way for the elite to define its own group and sexuality functioned as an important component when forming an aristocratic self-image. Through analyses of Icelandic romances and other sources, this dissertation shows that sexuality was frequently used to make distinctions of various kinds. Sexuality served as a marker to distinguish the chivalrous from the common, the human from the monstrous and the masculine from the feminine.

In the romances, a homosocial pattern emerges, reflecting changing conceptions of male friendship in the aristocracy. In these narratives, it is the friendship between equal knights that matters. Chivalrous men seek each other's company and the strong bonds between them often affect the way they act sexually. A chivalrous knight is able to control his sexual desires and he also considers the consequences of his actions. These characteristics distinguish him from other men in the romances. The heathen, for example, acts without respecting the rules of chivalry. He lacks the ability to reason and his urges cannot be subdued. These traits apply to the berserk as well.

Sexuality was also important in distinguishing aristocratic women from other women. In the late Middle Ages, Icelandic aristocrats' interest in virginity increased – partially as a result of a stronger patrilineal way of thinking. However, the aristocratic approach to virginity was tinged with ambivalence. In the romances, there is something both enticing and frightening about the sexuality of young women. The maiden is adored because of her chastity and pure thoughts. On the other hand, her lack of sexual experience makes it difficult for her to control her sexual desires and to resist men. In this regard, the maiden is a source of deep worry.

KEYWORDS sexuality, gender, homosociality, virginity, aristocracy, aristocratic identity, romance, *fornaldarsögur*, *riddarasögur*, Iceland, Middle Ages