

Gisli's Saga

Wrongfully Accused

Gisli killed the right man when he went to revenge Vestein's death by killing Thorgrim.. This is evident for three reasons: firstly, Vestein and Thorgrim did not get along well; second, Thorkel swore a blood pact with Vestein that would have prevented him from personally taking action against Vestein; and third, Thorgrim had access to the spear that was used in the murder. We know that the killer must be either Thorgrim or Thorkel, but the saga is ambiguous about which one it is. At first, it seems like Gisli might have been angry with the wrong person, but looking more closely at the evidence makes it clear that Gisli killed Vestein's murderer.

Why did Thorgrim want to kill Vestein?. This is not really difficult to establish; Thorgrim and Vestein did not get along well at all. Thorgrim and Thorkel were also extremely close, and Thorgrim would have known that Thorkel was angry with Vestein because of Thorkel's wife's supposed affair and affections for Vestein. Also, Thorgrim refused to make a blood brothers pact with Vestein, so he would not have that barrier to killing Vestein.

But what about Thorkel? It seems that Thorkel has even more reason to kill Vestein than Thorgrim does because of his wife's talk of Vestein. Here it is important to note how much of a face-culture these vikings lived in. A face culture is a culture that heavily emphasises the avoidance of humiliation, embarrassment, and the preservation of one's reputation. And how could one be a reputable viking if he breaks his oaths? Of course, there were vikings who failed to keep their word, but Thorkel shows no indications of being willing to break his word at other times. For instance, when Gisli is outlawed, Thorkel helps him, despite having good cause to be angry with Gisli for the death of Thorgrim. He does this because he has made a pact of blood-brotherhood with Gisli, and would not break that pact. If he would be willing to help the murderer of a friend, at great personal risk, in order to avoid breaking such a pact, it seems unlikely that he would be willing to murder someone else in violation of the same pact.

Assuming that Thorkel is a good, oath-abiding viking, how would have Thorgrim obtained the Grasida spear that was found left in Vestein? Again, this appears, at first glance, to Thorkel's ownership actually supports Thorgrim's culpability. Thorkel, of course, got the spear when he and Gisli parted ways: Thorkel took the moveable goods that they had jointly owned, while Gisli retained ownership of the home and immovable goods. Thorkel and Thorgrim were very close, and Thorkel would have willingly loaned Thorgrim a spear under normal circumstances. But Thorkel would have been especially eager to do so in this case, because he would have known the reason that Thorgrim needed the spear: Thorgrim was going to kill Vestein because Thorkel could not and they both have reasons to do so. Hence, Thorkel would have been perfectly willing to loan the spear and Thorgrim would not even need to consider stealing the spear or borrowing it under false

pretenses. The final support to this is that Thorkel never reported a theft of such a fabulous spear (remember that the original Grasida was said to always kill the user's opponent). If it was not stolen, yet he no longer had it in his possession, Thorkel must have given it to Thorgrim to use.

Thorkel owning the spear also provides some reason to think that Thorkel did not kill Vestein. Because Thorkel owned the spear that was used to kill Vestein, he would have known who was guilty of the murder: if he had committed the murder, he would of course be aware of his own guilt. If Thorgrim had committed the murder, Thorkel would know because he would have loaned the murder weapon to Thorgrim. Thorkel shows that he is worried that Gisli will do something in retaliation for Vestein's death when he attempts to convince Gisli to get over his anger about the murder. If Thorkel were the murderer, he would have to know that his attempts to persuade Gisli would only seem self-serving instead of being taken as good advice. Similarly, if Thorgrim had not been the murderer, Thorkel would have been much more upset with Gisli, and would have been justified in refusing to help him after he was outlawed.

Thorgrim had more than enough motive: he and Vestein hated each other, although we do not know why. He had the means, because Thorkel would have loaned him the spear. And like Thorkel, he had the opportunity to do so. Thorkel, who was in a position to know, appears to have acted as he would if Thorgrim were guilty of Vestein's murder: he attempted to protect Thorgrim, but did not take revenge after Thorgrim was killed. And Thorgrim himself, the only other possible killer, seemingly appears to value the viking face culture which keeps him bound to all of his oaths to everyone else and ultimately unable to kill Vestein.