Chapter 2

The Present and the Past in the Sagas of Icelanders

Haki Antonsson

The Icelandic Commonwealth

There is good ground to believe that Medieval Icelanders were especially conscious of their own beginnings in history. Anglo-Saxon England offers a possible parallel here, at least in the sense that Bede recorded the memory of the Angles, Saxons and the Jutes arriving in sub-Roman Britain. But whereas the Anglo-Saxons came to an inhabited Christian land, Iceland's settlers of the late ninth century entered a virgin territory. Another aspect that set Icelanders apart in the High Middle Ages was the political arrangement under which they lived. Almost uniquely in Christian Europe Icelanders were not governed by a king or a prince, or any other personal central authority. Until 1262-64, when Icelanders acknowledged the overlordship of the Norwegian Crown, they were ruled according to a constitution that divided legislative and judicial power among forty or so regional chieftains. These gathered each year at the Althing, the General Assembly, to deliberate on new laws and pass judgments on court-cases. Crucially, this constitutional construction made no provision for an executive power.[1] The political set-up of the so-called Iceland Commonwealth – the name is a modern one for the Icelanders had no term for their system – was forged in the pagan period as Christianity was not adopted into law until 999/1000.

With Christianity came new intellectual and cultural influences, the most important ones, of course, the skills of reading and writing in the Latin alphabet. This, in turn, likely led to heightened awareness among learned Icelanders of the peculiarity of their political arrangement, an arrangement which was not only out of sync with Germany, England and France – from where the Icelanders derived most of their literature and learning – but also that of their Nordic neighbours.[2] By the late eleventh century Christian kingship had become

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[1] For a succinct introduction to Commonwealth Iceland see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London, Penguin, 2001).
[2] See Michael H. Gelting, 'The Kingdom of Denmark', in N. Berend (ed.), C*hristianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy. Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200*

firmly entrenched in Denmark and Norway which left the Iceland's political and cultural elite with a conundrum: namely, where lay the ultimate source of legitimate political authority in their Commonwealth? If secular power in Christian Europe was divinely sanctioned, and if kings and princes were the conduits of this power, where did this leave Iceland's 'constitution' which, after all, originated in the pagan past?

In Norway and Denmark questions regarding the origins of legitimate power had been answered in the earliest histories of these kingdoms which were written in the twelfth century: the authority of the ruling secular and ecclesiastical elite was gained and justified during the formation of these realms in the Viking Age and the concomitant conversion to Christianity.[3] This historical perspective is, for instance, reflected in a text composed between 177 and 1188 by the Norwegian monk or canon Theodoricus (Þórðr) entitled *Historia de Antiquitate Regum Norwagiensium*. Theodoricus' work narrates the story of the reigning royal dynasty from pagan times which, from his perspective, commences in the second half of the ninth century with its *Stammvater*, Haraldr Fairhair, who 'first drove out all the petty kings, and alone ruled all Norway for seventy year before he died.'[4] This, in one sense, marks the beginning of Norwegian history proper. But, according to Theodoricus, the unified kingdom of Norway did not endure and it was only through the efforts of Haraldr's descendants, most importantly the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason (995-100) and King Óláfr Haraldsson (1015-1028), that the realm of Norway was 're-unified' and, crucially, made Christian. Further lustre of legitimacy is bestowed on the rulers and their dynasty by emphasising the royal role in the establishment of the Norwegian Church and, tellingly, Theodoricus dedicates the work to the archbishop of Nidaros. Likewise, around 1200 Saxo Grammaticus, who was probably a canon of Lund Cathedral, composed his voluminous *Gesta Danorum* which tracks the history of the Danish royal dynasty back to legendary times

(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 73-120. And in the same publication see Sverre Bagge and Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, 'The Kingdom of Norway', pp. 121-166.

[3] See, for instance, Lars Boje Mortensen, 'Sanctified Beginnings and Mythopoietic Moments. The First Wave of Writing on the Past in Norway, Denmark and Hungary, c. 1000-1230', in Lars Boje Mortensen (ed.), *The Making of Christian Myths in the Periphery of Latin Christendom (c.1000-1300)* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum, 2006), pp. 247-273.

[4] *Theodoricus Monachus. An Account of the Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, ed. and trans. David and Ian McDougall (London, The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), p. 5. See also Sverre Bagge, 'Theodoricus Monachus: The Kingdom of Norway and the History of Salvation', in I.H. (ed.) Garipzanov, *Historical Narratives and Christian Identity on a European Periphery. Early History Writing in Northern, East-Central, and Eastern Europe (ca.1070-1200)* (Brepols, Turnhout, 2011), pp. 71-90.

and places the same dynasty at the centre of the conversion and, in its final books, the expansion of Christendom in the Baltic.[5] With their focus on royal lineage that held divinely sanctioned authority over their respective realms, Theodoricus and Saxo worked with a single narrative thread around which they spun the arrival of Christianity, the introduction of the Church, and ascendency of the Norwegians and the Danes into Salvation History. Thus in the first half the thirteenth century the core narrative of the two kingdoms had been established, which goes some way to explain why, unlike in Iceland, historical writing did not flourish following this initial flurry of recording the past (though many other factors were doubtless involved). Why relate the same story twice unless there was a compelling political reason to somehow change it?

It is a truism in the Middle Ages, the histories of kings, royal dynasties or nations (*gens*) reflected the time of their composition. Although these texts may not necessarily have been composed for overt propaganda purposes, they were still imbued with the notion that legitimate power extended in direct line from the past into the present. So, a history of a king or a ruling dynasty, however prosaic and lacking in overt Christian sentiments on the surface, still related to an existing divinely sanctioned office. Put differently, the past connected with the present through the deeds of kings and princes who, in the last analysis, were subject to Providential History. The same observation applies to other kinds of historical writings. For instance, a foundation-legend of a monastery or the history of a bishopric explains the emergence of these institutions, and how their survival allowed God's work to be performed at the time of their writing. Similarly, stories of long-dead saints (saints' lives) connected with the here and now through the physical relics the holy men or women had left behind, as well as their continuous display of celestial patronage through miracles.

It is not surprising therefore that the first work of history known to have been written in the Old Norse language – indeed the oldest surviving work of Old Norse prose in the Latin alphabet – also sought to link the origin and development of power in Iceland with the country's peculiar past. Sometime between 1122 and 1133 Ari Þorgilsson, a priest (nicknamed 'the Wise') and a member of the powerful Haukdœlir family, composed the so-called *Íslendingabók* ('Book of Icelanders') at the request or, at least, in collaboration with Iceland's two bishops. In this sort text (it only runs to some ten pages in the modern edition)

[5] *Saxo Grammaticus: Gesta Danorum*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, trans. Peter Fisher, 2 vols, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).

Ari offers an overview of Icelandic history: he relates the discovery and earliest settlement in Iceland around 870, the introduction of laws following the establishment of the Althing in 930, the adoption of Christianity into the same laws in 999/1000, and lastly the emergence of the Church with the founding of the two bishoprics, the southern Skálholt (1056) and the northern Hólar (1106).[6]

Why Ari the Wise wrote Iceland's history at this particularly juncture cannot be answered with full confidence, as he does not directly divulge his purpose in his brief preface to the *Book of Icelanders*. Certainly his industry can be linked with a growing sense of what can termed, in absence of a more fitting expression, as 'national identity' among the Icelanders, and a general impulse to apply the art writing to the history and laws of the Commonwealth. Ari himself relates that the laws (or rather part of the laws) had been first codified in 1117,[7] and from other sources it is known that he himself played a prominent role in composing the earliest version of the so-called *Landnámabók* (*Book of Settlement*), a compilation which recounts the settlement of Iceland.[8] Further, judging from both the content of *Íslendingabók* and its historical context in which it was composed, Ari may have wished to justify the peculiar and, at least from an outsider's perspective, anachronistic political arrangement of his own time.[9] In particular, in the early twelfth century Iceland had been placed under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Danish archbishopric of Lund, and for that reason it may have become imperative to explain how the Iceland's nascent Church connected with the Commonwealth and its history.

If so, Ari achieves this aim by showing the Icelandic Church as firmly embedded in the fabric of the country's constitutional arrangement. Ari proffers a vision of Iceland's history as a seamless continuum that was propelled by the alignment of the constitutional laws to the

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[6] The standard edition is Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, Íslensk Fornrit, 1:1 (Reykjavik, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1968), pp. 3-28. The most accessible translation with an informative introduction is Sîan Grønlie (ed.), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga. The Book of Icelanders. The Story of the Conversion,* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

[7] See, for instance, Peter Foote, *1117 in Iceland and England. The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies Delivered at University College London 14 March 2002* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003).

[8] For a partial translation of this compilation (which exists in more than one version) see Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (trans.), *The Book of Settlements – Landnámabók*, (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1972).

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needs of its inhabitants. The climax of Ari's narrative arrives with the peaceful adoption of Christianity at the Althing, the General Assembly, in AD 999/1000 which secured the allegiance of all Icelanders to the same laws.[10] In this way Ari explains and justifies the political organisation of the present by showing how Christianity and the Church came constitute an integral and organic part of the Commonwealth's history. If for other newly Christianized people of the period, such as the Magyars and the Rus', the baptism of the king or the ruler was of pivotal importance,[11] the inclusion of Christianity into law represented the Commonwealth's baptism of a kind.

Two passages, the first located near the beginning of the *Book of Icelanders* and the second at its conclusion, illustrate well how Ari deliberately links the past with the present. In the following he introduces what he considered the four most prominent settlers:

> Hrollaugr, son of Rǫgnvaldr earl in Mœrr, settled in the east on Síða; from him the people of Síða are descended.
>
> Ketilbjǫrn Ketilsson, a Norwegian, settled in the south at upper Mosfell, from him the people of Mosfell are descended
>
> Auðr, daughter of Ketill Flatnose, a Norwegian lord, settled in the west in Breiðafjǫrður; from her the people of Breiðafjǫrður are descended.
>
> Helgi the Lean, a Norwegian, son of Eyvindr the Easterner, settled in the north in Eyjafjǫrður; from him the people of Eyjafjǫrður are descended.[12]
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> At the end of the *Book of Icelanders* Ari includes the following information which directly mirrors the aforementioned list of settlers:

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[10] For a detailed discussion of this event see Jenny Jochens, 'Late and Peaceful: Iceland's Conversion Through Arbitration in 1000', *Speculum* 74:3 (1999), 621-655.
[11] Boje Mortensen, 'Sanctified Beginnings and Mythopoietic Moments'.
[12] Sîan Grønlie (ed.), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga*, pp. 3-4.

> Ketilbjǫrn the settler, who settled in the south at upper Mosfell, was the father of Teitr, father of Gizurr the White, father of Ísleifr, who was the first bishop in Skálholt, father of Gizurr.
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> Hrollaugr the settler who settled in the east on Síða at Breiðabólstaðr, was the father of Özurr, father of Þórdís, mother of Hallr on Síða, father of Egill, father of Þorgerðr, mother of Jóan, who was the first bishop of Hólar.
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> Auðr the female settler, who settled in the west in Breiðarfjǫrður at Hvammr, was the mother of Þorsteinn the Red, father of Óleifr feilan, father of Þórðr gellir, father of Þórhildr Ptarmigan, mother of Þórðr Horsehead, father of Karlsefni, father of Snorri, father of Hallfríðr, mother of Þorlákr, who is now bishop in Skálholt after Gizurr.
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> Helgi the Lean, the settler, who settled in the north in Eyjafjǫrður at Kristnes, was the father of Helga, mother of Einarr, father of Eyjólfr Valgerðarson, father of Goðmundr.[13]

These four are all important settlers but they are by no means the only prominent ones Ari might have chosen to mention. Ari was, of course, keen to show the prestigious lineage of the Icelandic bishops but, additionally and just as importantly, the two genealogies present a natural flow of authority from the beginning of the settlement to Ari's time – the continuity from the pagan (or semi-Christian) past to the fully Christian present. Thus the *Book of Icelanders* offers a master narrative in which, unlike that of Denmark and Norway, the past was not the preserve of kings and princes, but one which focused on something as abstract as constitutional law. Crucially, this history intertwined with the introduction of Christianity and early development of the Church. Of course Implicit in Ari's account is that Iceland's ancient elite accrued prestige and even legitimacy through its association with this (apparently) providential process. In no way, however, does this compare with notion of a single dynasty forming the axis around which history revolves.

In Norway and Denmark, as in the most of Catholic Christendom, historical writing focused primarily on royal (or princely) authority, whereas in Icelandic history the role of this

[13] Sîan Grønlie (ed.), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga*, p. 13.

authority was largely limited to the perceived part the Norwegian kings had played in the exodus of Norwegians to Iceland and subsequently the country's conversion to Christianity. This left a historical space which, in conjunction with the aforementioned consciousness of a clearly demarcated beginning, allowed the Icelandic authors, who lived in time of turmoil and change, to reflect one their own society in a particular period of the past – the period that would come to be known as the 'The Saga-Age'.[14]

The Sagas of the Icelanders

Some seventy years after Ari composed his *Book of Icelanders* the first Sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) were written. From around 1200 to the mid fourteenth century forty or so sagas are known to have been composed in Iceland (although many more have undoubtedly been lost).[15] The Sagas of Icelanders were recorded in the Old Norse vernacular rather than Latin and, moreover, they distinguish themselves from Latin historiography by mostly eschewing subjective and learned rhetorical language. The sagas are narrated in an 'objective' style in a sense that the action is described as though seen from neutral perspective, and they rarely include direct authorial exclamations.[16]

Further, the Sagas of Icelanders are mostly set in Icelandic society in a relatively well-defined period that extends from the Settlement phase to the second half of the eleventh century. Indeed the saga authors were acutely aware that Iceland of this past differed from their own society. In other words, they were keenly conscious of not projecting anachronistic elements on to the past, especially in relation to such matters as law and religion. Overall the sagas offer a remarkably consistent picture of the 'Saga Age' although, inevitably, it resembles in

[14] For excellent and wide-ranging discussion of Icelandic historical writing in general (and not just the sagas), see Diana Whaley, 'A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Iceland', in Margaret Clunies Ross (ed.), *Old Norse Literature and Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161-202.

[15] For good introductions to the Sagas of the Icelanders see Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age: Narration and Representation in the Sagas of the Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (Reykjavík, Heimskringla, 1999). Margaret Clunies-Ross, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010). Carol J. Clover, 'Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*)', in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (eds), *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, 2nd printing (Toronto-Buffalo-London, Toronto University Press, 2005 [originally published in 1985]), pp. 239-316.

[16] It does not follow, however, that the saga authors adopted a neutral stance on their subject matter.

fundamental ways the society of the authors' time. Still, through the projection of an idealised and stylized past this 'Saga Age' appears subtly different from the thirteenth century society depicted in works set in this period, the so-called Contemporary Sagas.[17]

But above all it is the subject matter of the Sagas of Icelanders that sets them apart from other historical writings of the period. Conflict between Icelanders in the tenth and eleventh centuries was understandably of limited interest to anyone outside Iceland. Indeed it is somewhat telling that, with the exception of the country's conversion to Christianity, no medieval foreign source relates a single event that occurred in 'Saga-Age Iceland'. This much is obvious, but what is seldom recognised is that the unwritten and assumed link of legitimacy, which, as noted, most European writings about the past had in common, is largely absent from the Sagas of Icelanders. Indeed the overt connection between the 'Saga Age' and the time of writing was mainly confined to genealogical matters and, it hardly needs noting, the landscape which the characters in the sagas shared with their readers and listeners.

The earliest phase of Icelandic saga writing coincided with dramatic developments both in Iceland's internal political arrangement and its relations with the outside world. The 1220s saw the commencement of a prolonged period of political turbulence, the so-called 'Age of Sturlungs' (named after the most ambitious of the warring families), which eroded and finally terminated the country's constitutional arrangement, and paved the way for the Icelanders paying homage the Norwegian king in 1262-64.[18] In this period of conflict, power became increasingly the preserve of 'big chieftains' and their extended families. This, in turn, entailed progressive erosion of the checks and balances that appears to have distinguished the early Commonwealth. The period saw the evaporation of the *relative* equilibrium of power, as envisaged in the constitutional arrangement and seen through glass darkly in the Sagas of Icelanders, as 'strong men' began to dominate ever-larger regions. By the mid thirteenth

[17] For an introduction to the Contemporary Sagas, see Úlfar Bragason, 'Sagas of Contemporary History (Sturlunga saga): Texts and Research', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 427-446.

[18] Helgi Þorláksson, 'Historical Background: Iceland 870-1400', in Rory McTurk (ed.), *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 136-154. For a contextualising of this period see Jesse Byock, 'The Age of the Sturlungs', in Elisabeth Vestergaard (ed.), *Continuity and Change: Political Institutions and Literary Monuments in the Middle Ages*, (Odense, Odense University Presss, 1986), pp. 27-42.

century Iceland was effectively ruled by a handful of such figures who jostled for favour with a Norwegian king who wished to extend his influence over the Norse colonies of the North Atlantic.

But these changes – concentration of political power within Iceland and increasing Norwegian influence – can be traced back, at least, to the latter half of the twelfth century. Since its foundation in 1152, the Norwegian archbishopric at Nidaros had claimed ecclesiastical lordship over Norse settlements of the North Atlantic, and thenceforth the Icelandic Church was drawn ever further into its orbit.[19] Similarly, stronger lordships emerged in some parts of the country in the twelfth century although the precise contour of this development has been source of considerable debate.[20] Still, there is general consensus that the turn of the thirteenth century saw a marked acceleration of these internal and external developments. The crucial question is, of course, what role these social and political factors played in the extraordinary burst of saga writing in the same period. Thus it is scarcely co-incidental that the earliest sagas about the kings of Norway (Kings' Sagas) emerged around the turn of the twelfth century. Although these sagas were not composed as propaganda for or against further relations with a foreign kingdom, they still attest to a heightened awareness of a different kind of political arrangement and the (often fraught) relationship of the Icelanders with royal authority.[21]

The question then unanswered whether the emergence of the Sagas of Icelanders around the same time can be placed in a comparable political and social context. The search for an answer to this question is not facilitated by the fact that the authorship of these texts, and even their dating, often relies on fair amount of guesswork. Further, we cannot establish any obvious impetus behind this literary production, such as a commission from seculars or ecclesiastical patrons. True, it has been argued that there is a correlation between saga writing

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[19] The most thorough analysis of the Icelandic Church is Orri Vésteinsson, *The Christianization of Iceland. Priests, Power and Social Change 1000-1300* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000).

[20] For a good introduction to the issues involved see Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Process of State-Formation in Medieval Iceland', *Viator* 40:2 (2009), 151-170. Sverrir Jakobsson, 'The Territorialization of Power in the Icelandic Commonwealth', in Sverre Bagge *et al.* (eds), *Statsutvikling i Skandinavia i middelalderen* (Oslo, Dreyers forlag, 2012), pp. 101-118.

[21] See, for example, Melissa A Berman, 'The Political Sagas', *Scandinavian Studies* 57:2 (1985), 113-129. Theodore M. Andersson, *The Partisan Muse in the Early Icelandic Sagas (1200-1250)* (Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 83-141.

and centralization of power in certain areas. A number of sagas that are generally thought to have been composed *prior* to the fall of the Commonwealth are set in parts of Iceland where nascent principalities emerged a relatively late stage, from *ca*. 1200 onwards.[22] Seen from this perspective works such as *Egils saga* and *Laxdæla saga* could have been sponsored by regional lords who wished to bring coherence and a sense of identity to their own area of authority through the recording of stories that had circulated in oral telling since the 'Saga-Age'. But even if we ignore the problem of dating and preservation, as well as the fact that these regional lordships were fluid and unstable identities, it is not always easy to envisage how stories of internal division and blood-feud, not to say sagas about much-travelled lovesick poets (for instance in *Kormáks saga*), could have functioned as 'solidarity building' instruments in Iceland's internal power-struggle.

Similarly it is difficult to demonstrate ecclesiastical patronage of the sagas of the kind that seemingly impelled Ari Þorgilsson to compose *Book of Icelanders*. The first monastery, Þingeyrar Abbey in the north of Iceland, was only established in the 1130s and thus no religious houses could trace its foundation to the Saga Age. In some instances though one can gauge the author's institutional interest, such as the pre-figuration of a location where a monastery or a church will eventually rise. Thus in *Laxdæla Saga*, which is traditionally dated to the middle of the thirteenth century, a certain Gestr, a prescient character, sees a great light shine over the place where the Augustinian house at Helgafell in Western Iceland will come to more than a century later, and he prophecies that this location will host 'the most prominent seat in the district'.[23] Additionally, at the end of the same saga its heroine, Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, atones for her sins as an anchorite at the farmstead of Helgafell, thus foreshadowing its transformation into an Augustinian priory in 1184.[24] In this and other instances it can be surmised that the author lived in the region where the saga is set (possibly as a canon at Helgafell in this case) or that he was descended from a particularly important character or family that feature in the work. In most other cases, however, it is far from evident that they were composed as works propaganda for particular ecclesiastical institutions or prominent families, although they were likely written by members of both. What we are

[22] Axel Kristinsson, 'Icelandic Sagas as Political and Social Instruments', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 28 (2003), 1-17.
[23] Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), Laxdœla *saga*, Íslensk fornrit, 5 (Reykjavik, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1934), p. 196. *The Sagas of Icelanders. A Selection* (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000), p. 400.
[24] Einar Ól. Sveinsson (ed.), Laxdœla *saga*, 228-229; *The Sagas of Icelanders*, pp. 418-419.

left with is the Sagas of Icelanders reflecting in a more general sense the issues and concerns of the Icelandic elite at their time of composition.

Additionally, we have limited insight into how thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders encountered and experienced the sagas in their everyday life. Usually the most promising way of assessing the popularity and use of medieval writings is to gauge the distribution of manuscripts in ecclesiastical and secular centres.[25] This method is less than illuminating in relation to the Sagas of Icelanders as their manuscripts (some which post-date the Middle Ages) were mostly collected in the early modern period in locations that reveal little about their distribution in our earlier period. That said, public readings of Kings' sagas, Legendary sagas and even lives of saints are attested in thirteenth-century writings, and one must surmise that that Sagas of Icelanders were not treated much differently.[26] Still, it should be stressed that writing in general and saga-writing especially was the occupation of the ecclesiastical and secular elite and, it follows, that the presentation of the past they contain reflect the thought-world of a particular group of men who are placed at the top of the social hierarchy – like seen in the case of Ari Þorgilsson's *Book of Icelanders*.

It has been argued that the blossoming of historical writing that came in the wake of the Norman Conquest of England can partly be explained by the English wishing to preserve the Anglo-Saxon past following a cataclysmic period of change.[27] Similarly, the Sagas of Icelanders may reflect a desire to record a past that offered an escape from a less than perfect present. Viewed from this angle, the focus on this fairly well defined period can be construed as a cathartic activity: the sagas describe Icelandic society as it was in the Saga Age – a heroic age of a kind – before the cracks in the constitutional arrangement had become all but irreversible. Although the sagas revolve around blood feud they are still set in a society that is

[25] See, for instance, Rosamund McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989).
[26] Jón Karl Helgason,'Continuity: The Icelandic Sagas in Post-Medieval Times' in Rory McTurk (ed.) *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 64-81.
[27] Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075-1225*. (Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 619. This is not necessarily the position held by Professor Bartlett.

fundamentally stable – it proves difficult for any individual or family dominate a large district for long – and where the rules of the political game are relatively clear.[28]

In this context one can note that in the nineteenth century, with awakening of Icelandic nationalism, the 'Saga Age' came to been as the country's 'Golden Age', and so served as a positive point of reference for Icelandic poets and politicians. Thus Jónas Hallgrímsson, who later became Iceland's unofficial bard, contrasts in his works this energetic, heroic and proud past with the slumbering Icelandic nation of his own present.[29] The saga authors, on the other hand, did not depict the 'Saga Age' in such a wholly positive light, indeed they readily display the deficiencies of individuals and institutions. One can even postulate that an important attraction of the sagas for medieval audience lay precisely in the unique way in which they held up human failings against a background of a relatively stable societal structure.

The Sagas of Icelanders and their Present: Some Themes

Although in style and structure the sagas show their origin in oral tradition, each one still bears a unique authorial imprint. Some sagas reveal their obvious association with oral telling while a few appear to be almost complete authorial inventions. As already noted, however, what almost all sagas share is that the action is propelled by disputes that are often related in considerable and exhaustive detail. Indeed some have argued that it is feud and the associated ideology of honour that, above all, sets the Sagas of Icelanders apart from other European literature of the High Middle Ages.[30]

But narration of feuds and disputes inevitably entailed addressing other issues which the authors considered important and, presumably, also resonated with his intended audience. At

[28] Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', in Rory McTurk (ed.) *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2005), pp. 101-116, at p. 11.
[29] For Icelandic nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century, however, the focus was more on the achievements of the saga writers than the glory of the 'The Saga Age'.
[30] The sagas '… depict a world in which the dominant ideology of honour is itself so fundamentally consistent that there seems no need to look to any alternative ideological system for interpretative help. On the other hand, we do well to study the society in which this narrative art developed, in order to understand better how such an ideological came into existence and how it functioned.' Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, pp. 225-226.

the risk of engaging in anachronistic comparisons a modern analogy can be offered. In recent years Scandinavian literature has been especially known for crime novels which are on average fairly formulaic in construction: they commence with a murder, followed by a police procedure leading to a solution, the exposure of the culprit and the rest. Like disputes define the Sagas of Icelanders, so this fairly rigid pattern defines the genre of crime fiction. But most Scandinavian crime writers, for better or worse, have loftier aspirations as they apply this structure to reflect and engage with the contemporary world.[31] Thus such novels may, for instance, address police corruption, problems of immigrants adapting to a relatively homogenous societies, or the limitations of the welfare state. Thematic strands are superimposed or embedded in the aforementioned structural pattern. A comparable process can be observed in the sagas of the Icelanders where political and intellectual themes are explored against the backdrop of disputes. The comparison breaks down, however, when one recalls that feud and disputes formed an integral part of the life of the saga audience (as an ever present threat), at least in those composed in the thirteenth century, whereas murder and police work is far everyday experience of most modern people. In the sagas, moreover, the themes and problems under review are often overshadowed by the conflict pattern and may escape the attention of the casual reader.[32]

Some sagas engage with themes that must have been topical in a society that was undergoing rapid change. These include the problem of leadership and lordship, the role and limitations of law in a kingless society, the tension between more established and arriviste families, the difficulty of gaining and maintaining honour, and even the problem of eventually securing salvation in a society where killing was not hallowed by divine sanction. Whether these and other themes are in each and every case explored through conscious authorial design is far from always apparent.

Let us first look at an example where the ‘authorial intention’ is fairly explicit. *Fóstbræðra saga*, the *Saga of the Sworn-Brothers*, is generally believed to have been composed in the

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[31] See the various contributions in Andrew Nestingen and Paula Arvas (eds)*, Scandinavian Crime Fiction* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2011).

[32] For an illuminating comparison of the Sagas of Icelanders with modern historical novels, see Joseph Harris, ‘Saga as Historical Novel’, in in Lars Lönnröth, John Lindow and Gerd Wolfgang Weber (eds), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature: New Approaches to Textual Analysis and Literary Criticism* (Odense, Odense University Press, 1986), pp. 187-219.

early thirteenth century but it takes place first half of the eleventh century and is set in Iceland, Norway and Greenland.[33] The saga relates the story of two Icelanders, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld and Þorgeir Hávarsson, who live by their own code of violence and extreme self-reliance. The *Saga of the Sworn-Bothers* is a rollicking action story which is propelled by the fierce machismo of the protagonists both of whom suffer a violent death: Þorgeir is killed in Iceland as he pursues a feud on behalf of King Óláfr Haraldsson of Norway (St Óláfr), while Þormóðr dies fighting alongside the same ruler at the famous battle of Stiklestad (1030). Although the saga is narrated in the aforementioned 'objective' style the author nevertheless intersperses the action with comments that may seem somewhat out of place in this context. Two of those 'digressions' relate to salvation of the souls of the protagonists. Regarding Þorgeir Hávarsson he writes the following:

> And yet it was no great wonder since the Almighty Creator had forged in Thorgeir's breast such a strong and sturdy heart that he was as fearless and brave as a lion in whatever trials and tribulations befell him. And as all good things come from God, so too does steadfastness, and it is given unto all bold men together with a free will that they may themselves choose whether they do good or evil. Thus Jesus Christ has made Christians his sons and not his slaves, so that he might reward all according to their deeds.[34]

And summing up the characters of the sworn-brothers near the beginning of the saga he adds the following:

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[33] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Including 49 Tales*, vol. 2 (Reykjavík, Leifur Eiríksson Publishing, 1997), pp. 329-.402. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Vestfirðinga sögur*, Íslenzk fornrit, 6 (Reykjavik, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1943), pp. 121-276. For the scholarly debate on the dating of this saga see Theodore M. Andersson, 'Redating Fóstbrœðra saga', in Else Mundal (ed.), *Dating the Sagas. Reviews and Revisions* (Copenhagen, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013), pp. 54-76.

[34] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 2, p. 336.'En þó var eigi undarligt, því at inn hæsti hǫfuðsmiðr hafði skapat ok gefit í brjóst Þorgeiri svá øruggt hjarta ok hart, at hann hræddisk ekki, ok hann var svá øruggr í ǫllum mannraunum sem it óarga dýr. Ok af því allir góðir hlutir eru af guði gǫrvir, þá er øruggleikr af guði gǫrr ok gefinn í brjóst hvǫtum drengjum ok þar með sjálfræði at hafa til þess, er þeir vilja, góðs eða ills, því at Kristr hefir kristna men sonu sína gǫrrt, en eigi þræla, en þat mun hann hverjum gjalda, sem til vinnr.' Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Vestfirðinga sögur*, p. 133

Both also felt early on – and it later turned out to be true – that they would die fighting, since neither was the kind of man to back off from or give in to anyone he came up against. They were more concerned with success in this life than glory in the life to come.[35]

In this most relentlessly violent of sagas this theme of salvation comes to the fore as Þormóðr fights alongside King Óláfr Haraldsson at the battle of Stiklastaðir near Trondheim. Even then, facing death, Þormóðr has no concern for next world; his only desire is to live or die with his lord. On the day of the battle Óláfr asks Þormóðr to account for his low spirits. Þormóðr answers that it is because he '"is not certain that we shall be resting in the same place tonight. Promise me now that we shall be and I will be glad"'. King Ólafr reply contains an obvious (and highly ironic in the circumstances) biblical allusion that the reader will likely recognise but to which, of course, the saga hero remains, oblivious '"I don't know whether it is within my power to decide, but if it is, then tonight you shall go where I go."'[36]

Although Þormóðr has his wish fulfilled to fall with his lord, we still ponder whether this suffices to usher him into Heaven. The attentive reader will, however, observe that the saga's seemingly pointless and certainly relentless succession of disputes and killings raise important ethical and even theological questions.[37] As noted, the overt authorial pronouncements of the author of *The Saga of the Sworn-Brothers* are peculiar in the context of saga writing and, as such, it was long assumed that they represented late thirteenth-century interpolations by a redactor who wished to inject his narrative with intellectual gravitas.[38] The 'learned clauses' certainly do not constitute the work's *raison d'être* but they still allow the reader to view the saga's action from a different perspective. The underlying idea is relatively

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[35] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 2, p. 331. 'Snimmendis sagði þeim svá hugr um, sem síðar bar raun á, at þeir myndi vápnbitnir verða, því at þeir váru ráðnir til at láta sinn hlut hvergi eða undir leggja, við hverja menn sem þeir ætti málum at skipta. Meir hugðu þeir jafnan at fremð þess heims lífs en at dýrð annars heims fagnaðar.' Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson (eds), *Vestfirðinga sögur*, pp. 124-125.

[36] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 2, p. 392.

[37] Uwe Eber, 'Archaic oder Europa: Theologisches Argument und Interpretation von Gewalt in der *Fóstbræðra saga*', in Heinrich Beck and Else Ebel (eds), *Studien zur Isländersaga: Festschrift für Rolf Heller* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2000), pp. 25-50.

[38] Jónas Kristjánsson, 'Elements of Learning and Chivalry in *Fóstbræðra saga*', in Peter Foote et al. (eds), *First International Saga Conference: Edinburgh 1971. Papers Published in the Proceedings of the First International Saga Conference* (London, Viking Society for Northern Research, 1973), pp. 259-299. Jónas Kristjánsson considered the 'discursive' material authentic to the original version of the *Fóstbræðra saga*, but argued that the learned clauses point to the work being the product of the latter rather than the early thirteenth century.

straightforward: seculars in this world enjoy a free will that can lead them to either to heaven or hell. The main protagonists can make the right choice but their uncompromising and unthinking personalities impel them to behave as though they were oblivious to this most important of all issue, the fate of the soul in the afterlife. The nature of Þorgeir's and Þormóðr's predicament is only enhanced by the closeness to King Óláfr, the greatest saint of the Northern World, who (as we have seen himself suggest) could have aided their entry into Heaven. Almost comically tunnel-visioned in their conduct, however, the two are unable to sense the choices so transparently offered before them. In a broader sense this theme highlights the dilemma faced by Iceland's secular elite in the violent time of the thirteenth-century.[39]

In our next case the saga in its entirety appears to have been crafted to convey a particular message. The problem, however, is that the meaning of this message is far from obvious. *Hrafnkels Saga*, composed in the last decades of the thirteenth century, relates the rise and fall, and rise again, of an Icelandic chieftain in the first half of the tenth century.[40] The saga begins by presenting Hrafnkell, an early settler, as the most powerful chieftain in his region in North-Eastern Iceland who, although domineering, is a fair lord to his underlings and dependents. The ambiguity of the saga's portrayal of Hrafnkell's character is encapsulated in the following description:

When Hrafnkel had taken the land at Adalbol, he held great sacrifices, and had a great temple built. Hrafnkell loved no other god more than Frey, and he dedicated half of all his best livestock to him. Hrafnkell settled the entire valley and gave people land, but he wanted to be their superior, and took the godord over them. Owing to this, his name was extended, and he was called Frey's Godi. He was unfair towards other people, but was well accomplished. He forced the people of Jokulsdal to become his thingmen, and was mild and gentle with his own people, but stiff and stubborn with the people of Jokulsdal who never received any justice

[39] On this theme in early sagas writing see Haki Antonsson, 'Salvation and Early Saga Writing in Iceland: Aspects of the Works of the Monks of Þingeyrar and their Associates', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 8 (2012), 71-140.

[40] Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, Íslensk fornrit, 11 (Reykjavik: Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1950), pp. 97-133. Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, vol. 5, pp. 261-281.

from him. Hrafnkel was often involved in single combats and never paid anyone reparation. No one received any compensation form him, whatever he did.[41]

Hrafnkell's adherence to the pagan god Freyr sets the plot in motion as he kills a lowly shepherd who disobeys his stricture not to mount his favourite steed. Þorbjörn, the shepherd's father, refuses to accept Hrafnkell's generous offer of compensation and, with the aid of his nephew Sámr, he brings the case to the General Assembly. There, somewhat unexpectedly, Þorbjörn and Sámr secure the support of two powerful chieftains from a distant district and their deliberations results in Hrafnkell's outlawry. Hrafnkell ignores the verdict but Sámr, along with his allies, catch him unawares and present him with two alternatives: he can choose immediate death or to save his life but loose all his land and possessions. Hrafnkell chooses the latter option and moves to another region where he soon rises to power and prominence. Hrafnkell finally exacts his revenge when he kills Sámr's brother and at the end of the saga he has regained his pre-eminent position in the region.

The unknown author of *Hrafnkels saga* uses a story from the pagan past, which likely existed in one form or another in oral telling, to convey something important about the nature and execution of secular lordship. The work is relatively short and devoid of digressions and subplots that feature in many other sagas. But what truth is he trying to tell? This question has concerned scholars ever since the study of the Sagas of Icelanders commenced in earnest in second half of the nineteenth century. The varied answers offered attest to the elusive nature of the text. *Hrafnkels saga* has been read as a Christian morality tale of sorts where the eponymous hero has learnt at the end of the saga to change his behaviour and so emerge as an exemplary chieftain. This reading seems supported by the character description which appears following his humbling by Sámr and the expulsion from his lands: 'A great change had suddenly taken place in that the man was much more popular than before. He had the same temperament as regards his helpfulness and generosity, but was now a more gentle man

[41] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* vol. 5, p. 262. 'En þá er Hrafnkell hafði land numit á Aðalbóli, þá efldi hann blót mikil. Hrafnkell lét gera hof mikit. Hrafnkell elskaði eigi annat goð meir en Frey, ok honum gaf hann alla ina beztu gripi sína hálfa við sik. Hrafnkell byggði allan dalinn ok gaf mǫnnum land, en vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim. Við þetta var lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Freysgoði, ok var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, en menntr vel. Hann þrøngði undir sik Jǫkuldalsmenn, ok fengu af honum engan jafnað. Hrafnkell stóð mjǫk í einvígjum ok bœtti engan mann fé, því at engi fekk af honum neinar bœtr, hvat sem hann gerði.' Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, pp. 98-99.

than before, more restrained in all ways.'[42] Other readings have doubted this 'character-building' trajectory and stressed Hrafnkell's Machiavellian nature: his overbearing character is not transformed but he learns to adapt to new social circumstances. In short, 'the debate is in effect between those who construe the story morally and those who construe it politically.'[43] Textual details can in truth be marshalled to support both these interpretations and, indeed, in support of the view that Hrafnkell does in fact shows good lordship throughout the saga. Such differing interpretations reflect, of course, that in *Hrafnkels saga,* as in other sagas (with few exceptions like the one just seen in the *Saga of the Sworn-Brothers*), the action of the characters is left to speak for itself while it contains no overt authorial pronouncement of a particular 'message' or a moral.

This interpretative problem of *Hrafnkels saga* illustrates the fundamental difference of this text from High Medieval writings where the behaviour of men in authority is frequently judged according to the criteria of just rulership. For instance, in William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, completed in 1125, the kings of England into either a good or bad category. William understood that the temptations of the world that and the pressures of power can sway even the most inherently worthy king from the path of righteousness.[44] Similarly Hrafnkell is manifestly neither a bad nor an ideal chieftain. Indeed the latter route is hardly an option for the demands of decentralised society, which is underpinned by honour and feud, requires men of authority to behave in a manner that transgress the idea of just rulership. The difference is that William of Malmesbury (and other writers of his period) possessed an implied template for how an ideal ruler *could and should* behave because political authority in England and elsewhere in Latin Christendom was, in the last analysis, divinely sanctioned. As seen, this was not the case in 'Saga-Age' Iceland and hence the saga authors, like in the cases of law and religion, avoided, or did not even consider, applying this template on their characters.

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[42] Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 5, p. 276. 'Var nú skipan á komin á lund hans. Maðrinn var miklu vinsælli en áðr. Hafði hann ina sǫmu skapsmuni um gagnsemð ok risnu, en miklu var maðrinn nú vinsælli ok gæfari ok hœgri en fyrr at ǫllu.' Jón Jóhannesson (ed.), *Austfirðinga sǫgur*, p. 125.
[43] Theodore M. Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Saga (1180-1280*) (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 181.
[44] Björn Weiler, 'William of Malmesbury on Kingship', *History* 90 (2005), 3-22

It has been argued that *Hrafnkels saga's* principal theme must have enjoyed particular topicality following the introduction of royal officials in the late thirteenth century whose position, unlike the chieftains of the Commonwealth, was guaranteed by an higher authority, namely by the king and ultimately by God. Rebellion against these new rulers was not an option.[45] There may be a grain of truth in this hypothesis but *Hrafnkels saga* scarcely offers a Christian pre-script for how a thirteenth-century chieftain should behave. Rather, the saga's core concern is with the precariousness of lordship in a society where undeserving men, such as the lowly born Sámr, can bring down born-to-rule characters like Hrafnkell. Although at the end of the saga there is a strong sense that the natural order of things has been restored, this has been effected through Hrafnkell's own actions rather than any higher authority, whether royal or divine.

Christian notions of just lordship are more apparent in the Contemporary Sagas than in the Sagas of Icelanders. For instance *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, composed around the middle of the thirteenth century, focuses on the chieftain Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (d.1213) who is presented as a paragon of lordship which involves piety, good governance and concern for the weak. These virtues, however, are of scant use in this particular regional power-struggle and he is executed in a manner evoking martyrdom.[46] In *Þorgils saga skarða*, which narrates the life of a leading political player of the 1250s, the saga's eponymous hero changes from a ruthless leader to one who seeks absolution for his sins, rapprochement with his enemies, and popularity with the farmers under his authority. Like in Hrafn's case, such behaviour, however, not does spell success in the dog-eat-dog world of late Commonwealth Iceland for, like Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, Þorgils skarði's is killed in a manner which, again, consciously echoes martyrdom.[47]

Whether such 'Christianization' of lordship in the Contemporary Sagas reflects actual behaviour in each and every case cannot be verified. What is certain, however, is that in the post 'Saga-Age' secular authority in Iceland accrued some of the aura of divine legitimacy

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[45] Theodore M. Andersson, 'Ethics and Politics in Hrafnskells Saga', *Scandinavian Studies* 60:2 (1988), 293-309.

[46] For the separate version of his saga see Guðrún P. Helgadóttir (ed.), *Hrafns Saga Sveinbjarnarsonar* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987).

[47] Jón Jóhannesson *et al*. (ed.) Sturlunga saga II (Reykjavík, Sturlungaútgáfan ,1946), 190-221. Haki Antonsson, 'The Lives of Thomas Becket and Early Scandinavian Literature', *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 81:2 (2015), 394-413, at pp. 407-409.

through association with royal power and, as we have seen in Ari's account, the conversion to Christianity and close association with the Church. In the twelfth century the family of Oddaverjar, which dominated southern Iceland in that period, considered themselves to be cut above the rest of the native elite. Learned members of this family compiled a genealogy that traced its ancestry to the Skjöldungs, the Danish royal dynasty, while the most outstanding of the Oddaverjar, the chieftain Jón Loptsson, had a poem composed in his honour which celebrated his descent from the Norwegian kings.[48] Later, in 'Age of the Sturlungs' the main political players at least partly legitimized their overlordship by emphasising their connections with the Norwegian king, even on occasions ceremonially attaching their cause to celestial patronage.[49]

But, as seen in *Hrafnkels saga*, such exalted ideas of lordship have only the faintest of echoes in the Sagas of the Icelanders. Here the emphasis is on the acquisition and retention of power within a society devoid of an ultimate royal and divine origin. Another instructive illustration of this can be found in *The Saga of the Confederates* (*Bandamanna Saga*), traditionally dated to late thirteenth century, which approaches a comparable topic as *Hrafnkels saga* but in this case from a very different perspective.[50] The saga is a carefully crafted comedic tale that, like *Hrafnkels saga*, deals with the transience of social status in a society where power and prestige has no ultimate guarantor in the shape of royal or princely authority. The saga's hero is a certain Oddr, a young man from a distinguished family whose mercantile nous allows him to buy a chieftaincy and become one of Iceland's richest men. When Oddr temporarily leaves for Norway he makes unwise decision to entrust property and chieftaincy to a certain Óspakr, a scion of a less than salubrious family. Oddr must eventually use force to evict Óspakr from his farmstead which leads the latter to retaliate by killing Oddr's friend. Oddr's case against Óspakr is scuppered when he secures support from eight powerful chieftains

[48] See for instance, Ármann Jakobsson, *Í leit að konungi. Konungsmynd íslenskra konungasagna* (Reykjavík, Háskólaútgáfan, 1997), 143-171. Úlfar Bragason, 'Genealogies: A Return to the Past', in Karl G. Johansson (ed.), *Den nörröna renässansen. Reykholt, Norden och Europa 1150-1300* (Reykholt, Snorrastofa: Cultural and Medieval Centre, 2007), pp. 73-81. For the Icelandic elite and the writing of Legendary sagas (*Fornaldarsögur*) see Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North. The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, trans. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense, Odense University Press, 2002).

[49] See, for example, the religious ceremony held by one side before the 'Battle of Þveráreyrum' in 1255. Sturlunga saga II, 187-188.

[50] Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar - Bandamanna saga - Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar*. Íslenzk fornrit, 7 (Reykjavík, Hið Íslenzka fornritafélag, 1936), 293-374. Viðar Hreinsson (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 5, pp. 283-308.

from other parts of the country (the confederates of the title) who have clearly become envious of Oddr's success. The case is about to be dismissed due to technicality when, Ófeigr, Oddr's father, saves the day by effectively bribing the jury. The confederates respond by launching a counter-case against Oddr and Ófeigr for perversion of justice. In a sequence of comic encounters, however, Ófeigr is able to turn the confederates against each other by pandering to their greed and vanity. In the saga's climatic scene Oddr chooses two of the confederates (who he had bribed) to arbitrate the case, an occasion that provides him with the opportunity to mock the character flaws of the other chieftains which belie their social eminence. In the following speech Oddr highlights the gulf between small-time mentality of two of the chieftains and their attempts to cast a royal authority over their power, a barb not doubt aimed at similar pretentions of the ruling class in late thirteenth-century Iceland:

'There you sit, Jarnskeggi. You don't lack the pride to judge this case, and it wouldn't displease you to have it referred to you. Indeed, your pride is so great that you had a banner carried before you at the Vodla Assembly, as if before a king, yet you will not be king over this lawsuit, and I count you out'. Then Ofeig looked around and said, 'There you sit, Beard-Broddi. Is it true that when you were with King Harald Sigurdarson he said that, of all the men in Iceland, he thought you best fitted to be a king? Broddi answered, 'The king often spoke graciously to me, but it's not certain that he meant everything he sad'. 'You can king it over other things than this lawsuit,' said Ofeig, 'and I count you out.'[51]

Oddr's serial mocking of the Confederates echoes the Eddic poem *Lokasenna* (of uncertain date) in which Loki publicly defames the gods showing up their vanity and questionable sexual mores.[52] But, as in the case of the *Lokasenna*, the mockery is neither aimed at dethroning nor delegitimizing the established order. Rather, the satire in both owes more to the licenced and time-limited ridicule of authority that Bakhtin famously highlighted in

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[51] Viðar Hreinsson, (general ed), *The Complete Sagas* vol. 5, pp. 302-303. '"Þar sitr þú Járnskeggi; þat er mér sagt, at þú létir bera merki fyrir þér norðr á Vǫðlaþingi sem fyrir konungum. Nú skil ek eigi, hvar koma mun metnaði þínum, ef þú hefir af þessu virðing, ok kýs ek þik frá, ok verð ek fyrir þínum hlut at sjá, at eigi geysisk þú ór virðingunni. Þar sitr þú, Skegg-Broddi; hvárt var satt, at Haraldr konungr mælti þat, at værir bezt til konungs fallinn á Íslandi?" Hann segir: "Eigi veit ek þat; mart mælti Haraldr konungr þat til mín, er ek veit eigi, hverr alhugi því fylgði." Ófeigr segir: "At síðr mynda ek því samþykkjask, at þú værir konungr á Íslandi, at eigi skaltu konungr yfir þessu máli, ok kýs ek þik frá."' Guðni Jónsson (ed.), *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, p. 348.

[52] John Lindow, 'A Mythic Model in Bandamanna saga and its Significance', *Michigan German Studies* 3:1 (1977), 1-12.

medieval and early modern literature.[53] The gist of Oddr's mockery of Járnskeggi centres around the chieftain's attempt to associate himself with the paraphernalia of kingship, a pretence that stands in sharp contrast with the reality of Icelandic politics in the 'Saga Age'. For the early the audience of *Bandamanna saga*, however, the concept of the Icelandic elite bolstering its status and legitimacy through association with kingly power would been a familiar one. The prosecution comes to nothing and Oddr's status in the region is strengthened.

In spite of the very different texture of *Bandamanna saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*, the one violent with tragic overtones the other a comedy distinguished by a marked lightness of touch, they nevertheless share a thematic common thread. Hrafnkell is temporarily toppled from his place of authority by Þorbjörn, who achieves this with the aid of powerful highborn chieftain from another quarter, while Óspakr, a social inferior, who attempts to gain undeserved power and distinction by the help of aristocrats from all four quarters of Iceland. True the latter work can be read as a satire on the self-serving ethos of the entrenched upper class, but in the last analysis it shares with *Hrafnkels saga* an essentially conservative outlook that expresses the anxiety of the dominant class in a time of relatively rapid social and political changes. Indeed it is telling that in the end Oddr, who himself comes from a distinguished family, marries the daughter of one of the oligarchs. But matters do not, of course, remain static for Oddr solidifies his societal status not only by cunning (or rather that of his father) and fine ancestry, but also by mobilizing the wealth he had accrued through trade after the fashion of the nouveau riche.[54]

Fundamentally, however, *Hrafnkels saga* and the *Saga of the Confederates* reflect and, arguably in the process, entrench the view of power in a society that had become increasingly hierarchical in the course of the thirteenth century. This power, however, must be accompanied not only with distinguished ancestry but also qualities such as intelligence, craftiness and legal knowledge. Hrafnkell, the confederates and, indeed Oddr in the early part

[53] Ármann Jakobsson, *Illa fenginn mjöður. Lesið í miðaldatexta* (Reykjavík, Háskólaútgáfan, 2009), pp. 35-36.

[54] On the attitude, and perhaps the shifting attitude, of the sagas towards the accumulation of wealth through trade see Helgi Þorláksson, 'Social Ideals and the Concept of Profit in Thirteenth-Century Iceland', in Gísli Pálsson (ed.), *From Sagas to Society: Comparative Approaches to Early Iceland* (London, Hisarlik Press, 1992).

of *Bandamanna saga* learn the lesson of complacency in a society where even the law cannot guarantee property and power.

But even the possession of these qualities come to naught in *Njáls saga*, the longest and the most famous of the sagas, composed (as *Hrafnkels saga* and likely the *Saga of the Confederates*) in the last quarter of the thirteenth century of shortly after the termination of the Icelandic Commonwealth.[55] Although *Njáls saga* is mainly set in the first half of the eleventh century it clearly reflects social and political issue of the time of its writing. The saga's principal theme is the limitations the existing power structure to maintain peace and harmony in a society that is based on the ethos of honour and vengeance. Two of the saga's principal characters, the wise and erudite (in matters of law) Njáll and the noble and heroic Gunnar, are unable to extract themselves from the relentless momentum of blood-feuds that finally cost them their lives, even though they embody the very qualities that ideally should complement their elite status. With their combined attributes Gunnar and Njáll should be able to carry all before them and live as powerful and respected figures in their region of southern Iceland. This, however, is a forlorn hope as the envy of neighbouring chieftains and feuds between members of their own families draw the two main protagonist into a web of hostilities from which they are cannot (and, in the case of Gunnar, are unwilling) to extract themselves.

It is instructive to compare the views of the past promulgated in *Njáls saga* and Ari Þorgilsson *Book of Icelanders*. In the latter the hallowed element of Icelandic history reside in the development of the Commonwealth's constitution. At each turn changes in the laws at the General Assembly are associated with the common good and this leads inexorably to the harmonious constitutional arrangement of Ari's time. Thus the division of Iceland into four quarters with three local assemblies in each (apart from the Northern quarter which had four) was effected because it was inconvenient 'for men to go to an unknown assembly to prosecute for killings of injuries done to themselves.'[56] Later, in a still more crucial speech the lawspeaker stresses the inherent danger to society if pagans and Christians were to acknowledge different laws. The lawspeaker carries the day and the Christianity is adopted into law. The next momentous step is the adoption in 1097 of the Tithe Law by which the

[55] Brennu-Njáls saga; Viðar Hreinsson, (general ed.), The Complete Sagas of Icelanders vol. 3, pp. 1-220.
[56] Sîan Grønlie (ed.), *Íslendingabók. Kristni saga*, p. 10.

Church was allotted an annual tax on every eligible household. Note how in the following Ari stresses the harmonious relation between the bishop and the lawspeaker, as well as the obedience of the Icelanders towards the former:

Bishop Gizurr was more popular with all his countrymen than any other person we know to have been in this country. Through his popularity and his and Sæmundr's persuasions, with the guidance of the lawspeaker Markús, it was made law that everyone should reckon up and value all their property and swear an oath that it was correctly valued, whether it was in land or in movable possessions, and pay a tithe on it afterwards. It is a great sign of how obedient the people of the country were to that man, that he brought it about that all property in Iceland was valued under oath, including the land itself, and tithes paid on it, and laws laid down that it should be so as long as Iceland is inhabited.[57]

But in between the adoption of Christianity into law and the introduction of the tithe Ari relates the establishment of the Fifth Court (a sort of court of last appeals): 'Skapti held the office of lawspeaker for twenty-seven summers. He instituted the Fifth Court, and the legal provision that no killer should pronounce anyone other than himself legally responsible for a killing, whereas before there were the same laws about that here as in Norway.'

Njáls saga follows Ari inasmuch it has Lawspeaker Skapti introducing the Fifth Court and the accompanying establishment of new chieftaincies.[58] The saga, however, presents Njáll Þorgeirsson as the real instigator and eloquent spokesman of this constitutional change, a motion which Skapti merely brings forward under the auspices of his office. Njáll's eloquent speech, in which he extolls the benefits of the proposed legal novelty, could have been taken straight from Ari's *Book of Icelanders* but for one crucial difference. The reader is namely made well aware that Njáll's altruistic and public spirited utterance cloaks his real motive, namely to secure a chieftaincy for his foster-son, Höskuldr, which in turn will pave the way

[57] Sîan Grønlie (ed.), *Íslendingabók,* pp. 11-12. 'Gizurr byskup vas ástsælli af ǫllum landsmǫnnum en hverr maðr annarra, þeira es vér vitim hér á landi hafa verit. Af ástsælð ok tǫlum þeira Sæmundar með umbráði Markúss lǫgsǫgumanns vas þat í lǫg leitt, at allir menn tǫlðu ok virðu allt fé sitt ok sóru,at rétt væri, hvárt sem vas í lǫndum eða lausaaurum, ok gørðu tíund af síðan. Þat eru miklar jartegnir, hvat hlýðnir landsmenn váru þeim manni, es hann kom því fram, at fé allt vas virt með svardǫgum, þat es á Íslandi vas, ok landit sjalft ok tíundir af gørvar ok lǫg á lǫgð, at svá skal vesa, meðan Ísland er byggt.' Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), *Íslendingabók*, p. 22.
[58] Viðar Hreinsson, (general ed.), *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* vol. III, pp. 116-117.

for an advantageous marriage-alliance. In *Njáls saga* the development of the law, and thus the Commonwealth as a whole, is toppled from the consensual, almost sacred, pedestal it is placed on in Ari's *Book of Icelanders,* and is shown up to be the plaything of personal interests and ambitions (though by no means malign in Njál's case). In this respect *Njáls saga* can be read as the reverse side to Ari's portrayal of Icelandic history as a seamless continuity of constitutional development hallowed by divine design. From a bird's eye view the design may still be visible but in close proximity the history acquires an all too human dimension which is imbued with pathos and, it sometimes seems, pessimism.

As in the other post-Commonwealth sagas, *Hrafnkells saga* and the *Saga of the Confederates*, *Njáls saga* explore the transitory nature of power and prestige in a society where both relied on a precarious combination of ancestry, honour and craftiness rather than any princely or royal sanction. These families, however, claimed power through tradition and the notion, devoid as it was of any divinely ordained legitimacy, that these were the natural holders of secular (and in some cases ecclesiastical) authority within Iceland. *Hrafnkels saga* and *Bandamanna saga*, although not work of propaganda for such sentiments in the most obvious sense, it certainly reinforces views of this kind.[59]

In his *Book of Icelanders* Ari the Wise had provided his compatriots with a master narrative in which, unlike that of Denmark and Norway, the past was not the preserve of kings and princes, but rather revolved around something as abstract as the laws of the Commonwealth. In these northern kingdoms, as in most of Western Europe, histories were dominated by the royal authority; in Icelandic history, on the other hand, such authority was weak or lacking, and the historical space that this created gave authors the opportunity to reflect their present in one particular period of the past. Following a protracted period of civil disturbance, Iceland, entered the mainstream of European history in 1262-64, in the sense that from this point onwards all political power was ultimately seen to derive from divinely hallowed royal authority. And it was precisely during the kaleidoscopic decades prior and posterior to this epochal event that saw the flowering of the Sagas of Icelanders – a time of transition, in

[59] An explicit manifestation of this attitude can be found in the so-called Old Covenant ('Gamli Sáttmáli'), the agreement between the Icelanders and the Norwegian Crown in 1262-64, which stipulates that the royal officials should be drawn from the old and established families that had held power during the Commonwealth period Jón Sigurðsson (ed.), *Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn*, vol. I, (Hið Íslenzka Bókmenntafélag, Copenhagen, 1857), no. 152.

which stories about the past reflected topical issues uppermost in the minds of an educated elite that was less than secure about its fate in this life and the next.