

Doctoral thesis summary/ Autoreferát (teze) disertační práce

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Fast Goes the Fleeting Time: The Miscellaneous Concepts of Time in Different Old Norse Genres and their Causes

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Rychle prchá pomíjivý čas: Rozdílné pojetí času v různých žánrech staroseverské literatury a jeho příčiny

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Although several works about Old Norse people's time understanding have already been written, the topic is still far from being fully investigated. The research scope of the majority of these works is often too narrow, because their authors try to reconstruct Old Norse time perception based on the study of a single genre or even a single work of Old Norse literature. The results obtained through an analysis of such a limited choice of primary sources are arguable. In my thesis, I based the investigation of time perception in Old Norse society on the thorough study of a broad scale of genres. Contrary to my original intentions, I decided not to reduce the scope of the primary sources to saga literature, but I have examined other genres as well, including works of such diverse character as is for example *Poetic Edda*, a collection of mythological poems, or *Íslendingabók*, a historiographical text that describes the settlement and early history of Iceland.

I believe that only such a broader scope of the primary sources can reveal the surprising variety of time reckoning and perception present in different Old Norse works or genres. While some genres seem to be firmly grounded in domestic pre-Christian time understanding, others are strongly influenced by foreign time reckoning and perception that spread to Scandinavia together with Christianity and various learned treatises, especially historiographical and computistical literature from continental Europe. Concerning this fact, I try to answer the following questions in the thesis: What were the characteristic features of the local pre-Christian Old Norse time reckoning and perception? How different was the domestic (heathen) time understanding from the continental European (Christian) practice? How is the

arrival of new time reckoning reflected in Old Norse literature? What aspects of the local and foreign images and concepts of time do Icelandic authors blend in their works?

Primary sources

Although the temporal structure of each examined work and genre is specific, there are also certain similarities, based on which I have divided the primary sources into three groups. The first group is comprised of genres that are, in my opinion, rooted in pre-Christian Old Norse time perception and reckoning. Among these genres would belong the eddic myths and the legendary and family sagas. Subsequently, I analyse several works that adopt foreign concepts of time reckoning and, in a way, introduce them into Old Norse practice. Within this second group of primary sources, I examine the computistical treatise called *Rím I*, two early Icelandic historiographical works known as *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* and the dating formulas included in charters from the Norwegian and Icelandic *diplomataria*. Lastly, I study how the new reckoning and perception of time penetrates domestic saga literature, namely in the case of kings' and bishops' sagas which I have placed into the third group of primary sources. As I demonstrate, foreign influences are apparent not only regarding the dating systems and time indications used in these sagas, but also within the inner temporal structure of the narratives.

Methodology

Unfortunately, Old Norse people never described their ideas about time directly, but answers to the aforementioned questions can be found through the analysis of the temporal structure of their literary works. The analysis of the dating systems and time indications used in these works can give us an idea of how Old Norse people reckoned time, while the analysis of narrative time can help us to reconstruct their time perception. However, one cannot focus solely on the narrative analysis of the primary sources when studying local time understanding. It is also necessary to pay attention to the social background of these works, especially to the political and religious changes happening in medieval Scandinavia, due to their great impact on domestic time reckoning and perception. I took this fact into consideration when working out the methodology of my research. I use two research methods in the thesis which I call "synchronic" and "diachronic" analysis.

Synchronic analysis

I took on the term “synchronic” from linguistics (*synchronic linguistics*) where it means an analysis of a language’s properties at a certain moment in time. I use this term similarly, with the meaning of “a narrative analysis of Old Norse literary works’ temporal structure where the primary sources are seen as contemporary isolated entities.” Within the synchronic approach I analyse the following aspects concerning the temporal structure of the primary sources: Firstly, I examine the dating systems which the authors or narrators use to fix the depicted events in time, secondly, I investigate what types of time indications are most frequently used in each examined work or genre, and finally, I describe the characteristic features of the narrative category of time. This is done only in the narrative texts, that is sagas, and not in the case of the eddic poems or non-narrative writings included in the second part of the thesis, which are not suitable subjects for this kind of analysis. The analysis is based on a comparison of *narrated time* (time of a story) with *narrative time* (time of a discourse) based on the three concepts established by the French narratologist Gérard Genette – *order*, *duration* and *frequency*.

Diachronic analysis

The term “diachronic” I also took on from linguistics where it marks the study of a language viewed in the context of its development throughout history. I use this term in a similar meaning, namely for the analysis of Old Norse texts seen against the background of the social, political and religious structures that surrounded them. While the synchronic approach remains in the sphere of narratology, the diachronic approach is closer to the field of historical sociology. As I believe, the aforementioned fact that the temporal structure of different Old Norse saga genres is not homogenous, can be at least partially explained by certain social changes occurring in Old Norse society. What I particularly have in mind is first of all the transition from paganism to Christianity and secondly the transition from a gentile society to a society based on the feudal system.

Part I: Traces of domestic time perception in Old Norse literature

The first part of the thesis includes four chapters where I examine the temporal structure of Old Norse works and genres that seem to be rooted in the pre-Christian domestic time perception (*Poetic* and *Snorri’s Edda*, legendary and family sagas). Although these texts are preserved in manuscripts from the 13th and 14th century, they relate to much older times. The

eddic poems and legendary sagas narrate events that happened in the mythical or legendary-heroic past, the stories of family sagas often begin in the time when Iceland was being settled by Norwegians (the second half of the 9th century). In my opinion, all these genres contain several features characteristic for time reckoning and perception in pre-Christian gentile Old Norse society. In this first part of the thesis, I reconstruct an approximate image of time as it originally could have been perceived by Old Norse people.

Time in *Eddas*

Both *Poetic* and *Snorri's Edda* contain valuable sources of information that can help us reconstruct pre-Christian Old Norse time perception and reckoning. First of all, based on the eddic myths, one can determine the frame of Old Norse cosmogonic time – from the creation of time reckoning in the very beginning of the human world until the renewal of time after *ragnarök*, the end of the world. According to the myths, time itself was not created by the gods, contrary to the Christian concept of God as a creator of all times. Time, as perceived in the myths, flows both *above* people and gods, although the latter can avoid its flow by eating apples of the goddess Iðunn. However, it is the gods who stand behind the division of time into various time units created for people as a tool to reckon time and with the purpose of obtaining order in the human world. The end of the human world also means the end of time reckoning bound to this world, symbolized by the destruction of the celestial bodies. However, together with the emergence of a new world from the sea, described in the poem *Völuspá*, a new time reckoning begins as well, symbolized by the birth of a new sun. This moment seems to be the start of a new cycle in which the history of the old world will repeat.

The eddic myths are often referred to when examining Old Norse time's cyclicity, especially concerning the last strophes of *Völuspá*. The creation of the new world, described by the seeress at the end of the poem, is markedly similar to the creation of the old world. The seeress even mentions that during the process of creation certain events happen *again*. Furthermore, the very last strophe that includes the mention of a dragon can be interpreted as an indication of the repetition of the world's evil fate, *ragnarök*. Besides *Völuspá*, the hints that point to the cyclical nature of time can be traced back to the Old Norse names of months mentioned in *Snorri's Edda*. The fact that these names are based on certain periodically repeated winter and summer phenomena and activities might suggest that time was understood as a permanent rotation of them.

The names of months on Snorri's list mirror also another characteristic feature of Old Norse time perception, namely the close connection of time with its content. Originally, time was not seen as "empty," that is as an abstract time scale, a bare succession of days, months and years, distant from the events that take place in them. On the contrary, Old Norse time was "full," i.e. connected with certain type of activities and constituted by events happening in it. Besides being "full," Old Norse time was also "complementary" or "dualistic," as it was originally based on the pairing of complementary time indications. The most fundamental pairs, those that stood at the very beginning of time, were night and day (the moon and the sun) and winter and summer. Their importance for time reckoning can be seen also in the fact that they are all depicted as mythical figures in the *Eddas*. As it seems, one of the figures in each pair was the dominant one (night, moon, winter), while the other was the complementary one (day, sun, summer). Night and the moon played a crucial role in time reckoning, as regards the various moon phases. Night was also connected to the concept of fate and foreshadowing. Winter was the season that could represent the whole year, as time was originally counted in winters. The bipolar division of the year into winter and summer seasons (*misseri*) seems to be one of the features of the local time understanding that did not so easily disappear under the influence of Christianity and new time reckoning.

Despite the existence of these complementary pairs of time units, Old Norse time was in fact less fragmented than time as contemporary man perceives it. Contemporary man divides time into units of a precisely defined length and encloses its flow into the strict borders of the seconds and minutes measured on his watch. In accordance with the medieval Christian concept of time defined by St. Augustine, the present has shrunk to a bare moment in time, the moment when the future becomes the past. Old Norse time seems to be more flexible and the present much broader, mutually connected both with the past and the future. The events of the past become a part of the so-called Urð's well, the water of which nourishes the world tree Yggdrasil. Thus, the past nourishes the present, which can be interpreted as the knowledge and experiences of the forefathers passing on to the present generations. The connection between the past and the present is also achieved through genealogies. The predetermined future is distant in time, but at the same time omnipresent, as it can manifest itself in the present in the form of foreshadowing.

Time in legendary sagas (Legendary-heroic time)

Legendary sagas take us back into the time of heroes from the legendary past (*fornöld*) stretched between the mythical past on one side and historical time of medieval Scandinavia on the other side.

The myths seem to border the legendary-heroic past from one side. Legendary sagas are rooted in the mythical past, but at the same time the narrators refer to it as to something that precedes the legendary past. The gods or the giants are presented as the distant relatives of the legendary heroes and if the characters of legendary sagas tell of their past that lies in mythical time, they often do so in retrospective narration that is separated from the main narrative line. However, gods or supernatural beings from the mythical past can intervene in the legendary past and influence the fates of heroes.

As regards the relation of the legendary past with historical time, they were certainly perceived as separated from each other as well as fundamentally different based on their content. But on the other hand, they were also partially connected through genealogies. The family lines of the legendary heroes often lead forward to the historical Scandinavian kings and similar genealogical connection can be found also in kings' or family sagas, where it is applied the other way around, i.e. the family lines of historical persons (Scandinavian kings or "common" Icelanders) lead back to the legendary heroes.

This connection of the mythical past with the legendary past and the legendary past with historical time confirms the theory I mention in the chapter dealing with *Poetic Edda*, namely that the past was not perceived as enclosed by the Old Norse people, but on the contrary it was believed to have certain influence on the present and, in a way, it might have still continued within it. The past could stretch itself into the present especially in the form of genealogical chains that represented a bond of national or social heritage which passed on from the forefathers to their descendants. The legendary past can reach out into historical time also through a certain kind of foreshadowing, namely the predictions of the future fame of the legendary heroes that refer to a very distant moment of the historical time, namely the end of the human world.

One may ask if the legendary-heroic past as depicted in sagas is only a literary construct or rather a reflection of how this period of time was really perceived by Old Norse society. I am rather inclined to the second possibility, that is, in my opinion the literary images of the legendary-heroic past are based on the belief that this period of time, the time of heroes, really existed, but it was very different from historical time. The legendary-heroic past might have

been understood as a transitional, liminal phase between the mythical time of gods and historical time.

Time in family sagas

Family sagas are of course very different from legendary sagas, because they take place in historical time, more precisely in the Viking Age. However, they also contain traces of certain features that seem to be typical for pre-Christian domestic Old Norse time reckoning and perception.

The system of dating in family sagas is based partially on *relative* chronology that puts the narrated events into mutual temporal relations, but mainly on *genealogical* chronology, a specific type of relative chronology. All characters that appear in the narration are integrated into very elaborate genealogical nets that spread in time both backwards and forward. These often rather extensive enumerations of the forefathers or other relatives of the saga characters, the so-called *langfeðgatal*, play no role in the plot of the sagas. The main reason for their inclusion in the narration is the narrators' effort to create a temporal "background" of the stories. However, genealogies play an important role in family sagas not only as regards time reckoning, but also as a link between narrated time and the legendary past, as well as between narrated time and the present of the saga audience.

The temporal *order* of family sagas is strictly chronological, although there is no abstract timeline in the background of the narration to which the narrated events could be connected, contrary to for instance kings' sagas that use a timeline based on the regnal years of the Scandinavian kings in order to keep the narration chronological. Although one can often find references to Scandinavian (mostly Norwegian) kings in the introductory chapters of family sagas as well, they only remain relative, as the stories are not situated into the particular years of a king's reign. The presence of similar references in family sagas might be explained by the intent of the narrators to include Icelandic history into the "greater" history of continental Scandinavia. The chronological order of the narration is otherwise based on an inner relative chronology of the narrated events obtained through various kinds of time indications. Most of these indications are of a cyclical nature, because they refer either to the changing of the seasons, or to regularly repeated social events, especially the gatherings of assemblies, but also for instance the winter feast *jól*.

Concerning the references to the seasons in family sagas, one can notice that the traditional division of the year into two halves (*misseri*), i.e. the summer and winter half, is

well defined in the stories. As regards the category of *duration*, the narrative pace is markedly determined by the alternation of these two main seasons: in summer, when activities like sailing abroad or riding to the assemblies take place, narrative time slows down and the events are described in detail (in *scenes*), while in winter, the time of resting, narrative time accelerates and the whole winter period is often skipped over in the narration (in extreme *summary* or *ellipsis*). The same as in legendary sagas, time in family sagas is closely connected with its content and it flows only when filled with people's activities and various events (apart from ordinary events of everyday life that are in fact not considered events in family sagas). As I already mentioned, the connection of time with its content seems to be one of the characteristic features of pre-Christian Old Norse time perception.

As regards the social background behind the temporal structure of family sagas, they are closely bound to the Icelandic aristocracy of the Viking Age that was involved in various conflicts, participated in assemblies and organized sea expeditions. What also seems to have played an important role in the time of the local aristocracy as depicted in family sagas, is the belief in fate. When examining the category of *frequency*, one observes that family sagas include a great amount of foreshadowing that reflects a belief in predestined fate. Foreshadowing in family sagas is in many respects similar to that in legendary sagas: it is based on the traditional images of fate perceived as tragic, inevitable and usually revealing itself indirectly, embodied in various symbols, as animals or objects. The belief in fate is connected to the way how Old Norse people perceived the future, namely as already predestined and existing in the distant present. These images of the future, fate and the whole concept of foreshadowing changes radically under the influence of Christianity and the new perception of time.

Part II: Foreign time reckoning arrives in the North

While in the first part of the thesis I am concerned with works or genres that mirror pre-Christian Old Norse time reckoning and perception, the primary sources I deal with in this second part reflect the arrival of foreign time reckoning in the North, especially as regards the AD dating system, the Julian calendar and the Christian liturgical year. The new systems of time reckoning were introduced to the North through the Church and learned echelons of Norse society and they first appeared, among others, in Old Icelandic computistical treatises, historiographical works, or in the medieval charters written by Scandinavian kings and bishops. These are also the sources I am concerned with in the second part of the thesis that

consists of three chapters. Firstly, I shortly introduce the Old Icelandic computistical treatise known as *Rím I* (included in a compilation called *Rímbeġla*). Subsequently, I analyse the systems of dating and time indications used in two early Icelandic historiographical works, namely the so-called *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*. And finally, I examine the dating formulas in some of the charters written by the Scandinavian kings and bishops or archbishops and included in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* and *Islandicum*.

I certainly do not claim that these sources do not contain any traces of the local time reckoning at all. On the contrary, as I show, in all of them there can be found several references to the local dating systems or time indications. The changes of Old Norse time reckoning or perception did not happen “overnight,” the old and new concepts and images of time had blended together and long coexisted until the foreign ones, i.e. continental European, prevailed over the local ones. What I examine in the second part of the thesis is how this transition between different times reflects itself in the aforementioned sources. Sometimes, the differences between the local and foreign time concepts are emphasized, but mostly the authors try to achieve their synthesis.

Time in *Rímbeġla*, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* and *Diplomataria*

In the second part of the thesis I outline a basic image of how foreign time reckoning spread to the North from the Western Europe. The knowledge of the AD dating system, the Julian calendar and the liturgical year spread to society from “above,” i.e. through the learned layers of Norse society, the ruling class and clergy. The new systems of reckoning time soon found their way into the domestic literature.

As a result of the Icelandic interest in the computistical genre, the compilation known as *Rímbeġla* emerges. The treatises this compilation includes describe, among others, the Julian calendar, including the Latin names of months or their lengths, and compares this foreign time reckoning with previous Icelandic practices. However, a comparison of local and foreign practices is not the only way how Icelandic authors deal with the arrival of the new reckoning of time. The need for transition from one system of time reckoning to another arises and leads to attempts to connect the different times. This was done for instance by Ari Þorgilsson, the author of an early Icelandic historiographical work *Íslendingabók*. He blends the local dating systems, namely *relative* chronology, including *genealogical* chronology, and the dating based on the office periods of the Icelandic lawspeakers with the AD era or references to the regnal periods of various Christian rulers. Through combining the different

systems of dating he creates a very elaborate and complex historiographical system. At the same time, he manages to integrate domestic history within the “greater” Christian world history. A similar tendency is partially apparent also in *Landnámabók*, another early Icelandic historiographical work, whose author sets the *genealogical* chronologies of the Icelandic settlers into a temporal frame connected to world history.

The new systems of time reckoning were adopted also by Scandinavian kings and clergy, as one can see from the charters contained in the Scandinavian *diplomataria*. Both the kings and bishops/archbishops reckon time based either on their office (*anni regni* and *anni pontificatus*) or through the Anno Domini dating system, and sometimes also through a combination of the two. All of these dating systems come out of foreign models of time reckoning, the first two being *absolute intrinsic*, i.e. based on the local background (a king’s reign or a bishop’s office), and the AD era *absolute extrinsic*, referring to a universal time scale. The choice of the dating system was adjusted according to who was the writer of the letter or other document, while each writer favoured his timeline. However, it seems that in some cases the dating could be adjusted according to who was the intended recipient of the letter in order to show recognition of his power.

What is also worth noticing concerning the medieval charters is that time “shrinks” into the dating formulas placed usually at their very ends. Contrary to the original Old Norse image of “full” time that exists within events, time becomes separated from its content and concentrated into the abstract dates and years situated on various time scales.

Part III: The blending of times in sagas

The foreign influence is not only apparent as regards the new systems of time reckoning introduced to the North, as is the case especially with the second group of primary sources (computistical literature, historiographical literature and medieval charters), but also concerning other features of the local time understanding. Several fundamental changes as regards Old Norse perception of time are highly visible in the temporal structure of the so-called kings’ and bishops’ sagas. What one can notice, among other things, is the transformation of the role of genealogies in these saga genres caused by the increasing use of various chronologies, the disappearance of the original close connection of time with its content, or certain significant changes concerning the understanding of the future and the concept of foreshadowing. Therefore, in the third part of the thesis I examine these two saga genres and show some of the transformations of their temporal structures that are most

noticeable when compared to family or legendary sagas. I analyse not only the systems of dating and time indications to be found in kings' and bishops' sagas, but also the characteristic features of narrative time based on the aforementioned three categories of Genette.

Time in kings' and bishops' sagas

If one compares the temporal structure of kings' and bishops' sagas with the structure of family or legendary sagas, one can find several fundamental differences. The perhaps most distinct of them concerns the systems of dating used in these saga genres. The dating in legendary and family sagas is based on *relative* chronology which puts the narrated events into mutual temporal relations, and *genealogical* chronology, a special type of relative chronology. Every character that appears in these sagas is situated into an extensive genealogical net that spreads throughout time both to the past and to the future. In kings' and bishops' sagas one can encounter *relative* chronology as well, but the role of the *genealogical* chronology is overtaken by various *absolute intrinsic* chronologies based on the kings' ages and regnal periods (kings' sagas) or bishops' ages and episcopates (bishops' sagas). Time that had earlier been contained in the plurality of timelines in the gentile society following the genealogies and fates of the various families becomes concentrated into a certain unifying chronology connected either to the Scandinavian kings or the local bishops.

As a supplement to the *absolute intrinsic* chronology that stands in the background of the stories, various other time indications are used to further clarify the inner chronology of the narrations. What remains true to Old Norse tradition is the frequent references to the changing of the seasons, especially the summer and winter seasons. However, this kind of time indication is blended with references to the Christian liturgical year, first of all to Christmas and Easter, but also to various days of saints or masses. The liturgical calendar becomes an important element of Scandinavian time reckoning used within both the religious and political spheres.

As regards the transformations of narrative time, an interesting change can be noticed within the category of *duration*. In family or legendary sagas, time flows only when something is happening, for instance when the characters take some action, an assembly is approaching, the seasons are changing, etc. When nothing is happening, long periods of narrated time are omitted from the narration through *ellipsis*, often without referring to the flow of time at all. In kings' and bishops' sagas, time becomes independent of its content and

flows in a more regular pace, year by year, together with the chronological time scale in the background of these sagas that is attached to the narrated events.

One observes significant changes within the category of *frequency* as well, namely as regards foreshadowing in kings' and bishops' sagas. In kings' sagas foreshadowing mostly takes the form of what I have called "dynastic dreams" that reveal the future of the royal family and the kingdom, or "Christian dreams" that use motifs and symbols from hagiographies. The latter mentioned type of dream prevails in bishops' sagas too, where it is sometimes transformed into the form of a trance or vision. While foreshadowing in family and legendary sagas is mostly dramatic and reveals the tragic fates of the saga characters in the human world that cannot be changed, the Christian visions of afterlife do not necessarily have to be scary, depending on if the dreamer is living virtuously or not. Foreshadowing in kings' and bishops' sagas is no longer based on a belief in fate, namely the belief that the future is predestined and can reveal itself in the present. The dreams and visions are rather perceived as messages of God revealed to the people and concerning their present lives and deeds. Foreshadowing gains an ideological subtext, first of all, in that it helps spread Christian ideals among the people. Furthermore, in the case of dreams from kings' sagas (both the dynastic and Christian) it helps to legitimize and strengthen the position of the king, and, in the case of Christian dreams from bishops' sagas, to strengthen the position of the bishop, not only in the country, but also within the Catholic Church.

It is interesting to observe these transformations of the temporal structure of kings' and bishops' sagas in connection to certain changes within the social structures taking place in medieval Scandinavia, namely the processes of feudalization and Christianization of the Norse society. The reflections of these processes appear in family sagas as well, but they are depicted only as a part of the multiplicity of the various layers present in society. If the kings or Church enter the stories, their time, i.e. the references to the Scandinavian kings' reigns often placed in the beginning of family sagas, or the occasional references to the liturgical calendar (Christmas or Easter), stand *side by side* with the genealogies of Icelanders, the references to assemblies visited by all free men or the pagan feast *jól*. On the contrary, in kings' sagas the royal ideology stands in the centre of the stories together with an *absolute intrinsic* chronology based on the kings' lives and reigns. The same claim can be made about bishops' sagas, the Christian beliefs and the chronology based on the bishops' lives and episcopates. All other layers of society are subordinated to these unifying social and temporal structures in these saga genres.

Conclusion: Literary images of Old Norse time reckoning and perception and their transformations

Studying the time perception of a certain culture is always a complicated and complex issue, especially in the case of a culture that has never directly described its images of time. However, one can attempt to do so through an analysis of the temporal structure of the many works that Old Norse culture produced. This was the main task of my thesis in which I have examined miscellaneous concepts of time in different Old Norse works or genres and tried to find their causes. In order to achieve this aim, I based my research partially on a synchronic analysis, i.e. I approached the Old Norse narratives as separate entities and performed the narrative analysis of their temporal structures, and partially on the diachronic analysis, i.e. I tried to interpret the characteristic features of the temporal structures based on the social changes occurring in medieval Scandinavia.

I divided the primary sources into three groups, the first one including works and genres rooted in the original local time perception (*Poetic Edda*, *Snorri's Edda*, legendary sagas and family sagas), the second one comprising works that introduce the new systems of time reckoning into learned Norse society (*Rimbegla*, *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók* and the charters from *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* and *Islandicum*), and the third one including two saga genres the temporal structure of which is noticeably influenced by foreign time reckoning and perception (kings' and bishops' sagas), while at the same time containing certain reminders of the native concepts of time. By dividing the sources into the aforementioned groups, I was able to follow certain major transformations of Old Norse time reckoning and perception connected not only to the arrival of foreign time reckoning and perception in the North, but also to certain important religious and political changes within Norse society, namely the consolidating of Christianity in the North and the gradual centralization of the power and replacement of gentile society by feudalism.

The birth of an abstract concept of time

The first major transformation, as regards both time reckoning and perception lies in time's separation from its content. Originally, time as perceived by Old Norse people was closely connected to various events or activities within the human sphere, as well as to changes within the natural sphere (e.g. the changing of the seasons). This "full" time seems to exist only when filled with these activities, events or changes. The close connection of time with its

content is apparent, among others, from the narrative structure of family or legendary sagas. When something is happening in the story, narrative time slows down and follows the flow of narrated time very closely, in the form of scenic narrative. On the contrary, when the saga characters are inactive, narrative time speeds up, which results in the omitting of often very extensive parts of narrated time in the stories. Usually, the narrators pass these periods of time without paying any attention to them, as if time suddenly ceased to exist.

There was probably a mutual relation between time and its content: certain time was filled with certain content and, vice versa, certain events could only take place at a certain time. For instance, certain natural phenomena occurred only in specific periods of the year and certain agricultural or social activities were only performed by people at specific times of the year. This manifests itself in, as one example among others, the Old Norse names for months enumerated by Snorri in his *Edda*, or in the fact that the summer and winter halves of the year (*misseri*) were filled with specific content: summer was a time of travelling and taking action in lawsuits and violent conflicts and winter a time of resting, visiting relatives and feasting. Winter, as a period of long nights and darkness was also a time of the increased activities of the supernatural, when revenants came to the living, as well as prophetic dreams revealing future events.

The new perception of time that comes to the North with continental European historiographical literature and Christianity is very different in this respect. Time gains the form of an abstract timeline, independent of its content, that flows forward at a regular pace, regardless if something is happening or not. While originally time existed within events, or, in other words, events constituted time, later it becomes separated from them. It is not anymore *time that exists in events*, but rather *events that exist in time*, because time in the form of an abstract time scale constitutes the place for events that are situated into its course.

Old Norse people did not originally use any abstract timeline or era, despite the fact they could count into high numbers. The absence of an abstract era in Old Norse time reckoning was not connected to the inability of the people to create it. There was probably no social need to create such era, perhaps because of the use of genealogies instead of a chronological era, but perhaps also because the perception of time as defined by its content was so strong that it excluded the creation of an abstract era. However, under foreign influences several local *absolute intrinsic* chronologies appear in Old Norse literature and also the *absolute extrinsic* AD dating system gradually finds its way to the North. As a consequence of this development, time is separated from events and “shrinks” into the form of

abstract dates and dating formulas that define the position of a certain event within an *absolute intrinsic* or *extrinsic* time scale. This is clearly visible especially in the medieval charters and the early historiographical literature, but also in kings' and bishops' sagas.

The replacement of genealogies with chronologies

The original absence of a major chronological scale that would predominate Old Norse time reckoning was compensated for by using *relative* chronology, including *genealogical* chronology. The family lineages of the members of Norse gentile society form a "net" spread in time, both vertically, from the past to the present of the saga characters and even to the present of the saga audience, and horizontally, following both the close and distant relatives within one generation. The vertical extent of these genealogical chains is sometimes enormous, as they can also reach far back into the legendary past. The narrators of family or legendary sagas use these genealogical nets to fix the depicted events in time. Also, the author of *Landnámabók* uses these genealogical chains when describing events from early Icelandic history concerning the first settlers and their families. Later on, when various *absolute intrinsic* or *extrinsic* chronologies prevail as the main dating systems in Old Norse literature, the role of the *genealogical* chronology as regards fixing events in time is suppressed.

However, the genealogies still keep their function as a link of the present with the past. They are understood as proof of the significance or qualities of persons that belong to the family lines with a long tradition and famous ancestors. The royal lineages of the Scandinavian kings are often traced back to the legendary kings or heroes as a part of the kings' glorification or legitimization of their right to reign in the country. The family lines of characters from family sagas can be led back to the legendary heroes as well, in order to emphasize their greatness and the greatness of their entire kin.

The process of replacing genealogies with chronologies did not lead to the use of one major unifying chronology in Old Norse literature. On the contrary, the Icelandic authors combined various chronologies. Besides the chronology based on the offices of the Icelandic lawspeakers used in *Íslendingabók*, one encounters other *absolute intrinsic* chronologies based on the regnal periods of Scandinavian kings or episcopal periods of bishops, used among others in the medieval charters or in kings' and bishops' sagas. It is most likely that these *absolute intrinsic* chronologies rooted in the Scandinavian context were much closer to the common people (and the audiences of sagas) than the unfamiliar *absolute extrinsic* chronologies such as the AD dating system used by the learned layers of the society.

The original use of genealogies as a dating system involved a certain “plurality” of timelines contained in the form of numerous family lines. The plurality of times continued also after their replacement with chronologies that could be, as mentioned, of various kinds. However, while the plurality of genealogies was dependent on the original character of Norse society, i.e. its gentile character, the plurality of chronologies was contingent on the formation of various new social power structures, such as the clergy or royal dynasty. The struggles of these social layers for power reflected themselves among others in their efforts to seize control over time. These efforts aimed at the unification of time under one person, as is the case for example in kings’ or bishops’ sagas where all narrated events are situated onto one timeline constituted by the life of a king or a bishop that runs in the background of the narration. The unification of time in these sagas may be seen as a consequence of the ideologies that stand behind them, namely the recognition of the power of the Scandinavian secular rulers or the bishops.

The relations between the past, present and future

Another significant transformation of Old Norse perception of time concerns the way how the relations between the past, present and future were understood. Traces of the different perception of the past, present and future can be found in sagas, but especially in Old Norse myths, namely in the myth about the Norns, Urð’s well and the world tree Yggdrasil.

The Christian image of time, based on the concept laid out by St. Augustine, which in many aspects corresponds with the way we nowadays understand the relations between the past, present and future, defines the present as the only really existing time, or more precisely a bare moment in time separated from the past and the future. The past is enclosed from the present and can only be revealed in memories, and the future is undefined, not yet existing, and has only the vague form of expectations. As regards Old Norse time understanding, it seems that the present was originally perceived as much broader than we now consider it to be.

Although the past was divided from the present by its content (the mythical past was different from the legendary past, the legendary past from the Viking Age and the Viking Age from the time of the saga audience), they were to some extent connected. This connection is reflected especially in the emphasis on the uninterrupted continuation of generations. There was a firm bond between the people of the past and their ancestors achieved through genealogical chains. The personalities of the forefathers might have been inherited by their

progeny, as for instance the qualities of the legendary heroes could pass on within their kin. Moreover, the events of the past and the actions of the forefathers often influence the fates and actions of the saga characters. The penetration of the past into the present is embodied also in the so-called landmarks (the term is used by Diana Whaley), the social and physical reminders of the past. The narrators of family sagas for instance remind the audience of the fact that the farms or their names mentioned in sagas still exist, the same as with certain objects and inherited weapons. The past is not perceived as something lost, which is the way we usually tend to understand it, but rather as the firm basis of the present, as the foundation in which the present is rooted and from which it grows.

The relation between the present and the future was very different too. The future was perceived as predestined; it lied in fact in the distant present and might reveal itself in the near present in the form of foreshadowing. This belief in fate reflects itself in the frequent occurrence of foreshadowing, rooted in the heathen tradition, in Old Norse literature, especially in the myths, legendary and family sagas. The predestined future that foreshadowing reveals, mostly somebody's death, cannot be changed. On the contrary, it must be accepted, which is considered the act that shows the heroism of the saga characters. This concept of the future undergoes a fundamental change under the influence of Christianity. Instead of showing one's predefined future in the human world that must be heroically accepted, the Christian dreams (or visions) from bishops' and kings' sagas often reveal one's afterlife and urge the respective persons to change their lives in order to live in accordance with Christian ideals and get to Paradise. Foreshadowing is no longer a glimpse of a given future, but rather a message from God who warns people through his mediators, saints or bishops themselves, of the possible consequences of their present deeds.

The final discussion

One might perhaps assume that time as depicted in the primary sources is only a literary construct and the differences in the temporal structure of the examined works are connected to the overall genre differences between them. However, I believe that the concepts of time present in these works are rooted in their social background and the differences to be found in the temporal structures of the various Old Norse works or genres can be explained by certain transformations of this social background. Contemporary man understands narratives as entities independent of reality with specific inner rules that do not necessarily have to correspond with the physical laws or social conventions as regards, for instance, images of

time. However, this was probably not the case with a medieval audience that mostly perceived the stories as based in social reality as concerns their temporal and spatial structures. The social and artistic concepts of time were not as distant from each other as they nowadays can be. One can therefore claim that Old Norse myths reveal the original domestic concept of cosmogonic time since the beginning of time reckoning to its end and subsequent renewal. Legendary sagas contain the images of the legendary-heroic past, seen as a transitional period between the mythical past and historical time. Family sagas reflect the time reckoning and perception typical for the Icelandic aristocracy of the Viking Age. On the contrary, the computistical and historiographical sources like *Rímbeĝla*, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók* show the approach of the learned layers of the Icelandic medieval society to time and the attempts to compare or connect the local and foreign time reckoning that had arrived in the North. The dating formulas in the medieval charters mirror the struggles of the kings and bishops/archbishops for power over time. The same could be claimed about the temporal structure of kings' and bishops' sagas that reflect their efforts in enforcing the Christianization and feudalization of time. Let me add that the changes in medieval Norse society concerning the transformation from paganism to Christianity and from gentile society to feudalism are not only reflected in the transformations of time reckoning and perception, but also as regards the changing concept of fate and foreshadowing. This might be another proof that the transformations of time as depicted in Old Norse works are not only a literary construct, because they relate also to the concept of fate.

The primary aim of the thesis is to contribute to the research of Old Norse time perception. Furthermore, it makes a more general effort to broaden the knowledge of time perception in the Middle Ages. As a work that examines the topic of time understanding in a certain medieval society it represents a piece of the puzzle that can be placed into a complex and heterogeneous picture depicting medieval images of time. Studying time in Old Norse society is especially interesting because it offers a possibility to observe how original pre-Christian time perception, preserved in certain Old Norse works, has been blended with foreign concepts of time. I also believe that similar studies of time understanding in ancient or medieval civilisations contain deep meaning for contemporary people, because they show us alternative ways of time reckoning and perception. Some of the original Old Norse temporal concepts, such as the *genealogical* chronology, the connection of time with its content, the plurality of times or the broader present that could partially embrace the past and future, must

certainly be interesting for contemporary man, whose life and activities are strictly governed by the ticking of his watch and Google Calendar.

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