

Univerzita Karlova

Filozofická fakulta

Ústav germánských studií

Germánské literatury

Autoreferát (teze) disertační práce

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CONTINUITY AND CONTACT: THE CONTEMPORARY SAGAS AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Kontinuita a kontakt: Ságy o současnosti a kulturní paměť

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2021

The objective of the study

While various Old Norse texts that can be predominantly regarded as “founding narratives”, such as *Íslendingabók*, *Landnámabók*, the sagas of Icelanders, or some of the mythological texts, have already been studied from the perspective of cultural memory, and their image of the medieval Icelanders’ identity has been re-evaluated, the contemporary sagas have been neglected in this respect. They have not primarily been perceived as “founding narratives” because they depict recent events that were not yet clearly defined as “the past” at the time of writing. I believe, however, that for this very reason, they offer a unique opportunity to analyse the process by which recent past becomes integrated into cultural memory, and to show how the already established cultural myths of the given society are employed in this process. The hypothesis that I attempt to confirm in the present study is that *Sturlunga saga* creates the “founding narrative” of the Norwegian-Icelandic union from the Icelanders’ perspective, defines the Icelanders’ position within it, and constructs a meaningful relationship between the Sturlung Age and the time around 1300. That was probably when the Sturlung Age was first consciously defined as “the past”, and the perception of it could be formed by ideas of the present on the one hand, and by narrative traditions of the more distant past on the other hand.

In previous research of the contemporary sagas, it was rather the historical knowledge than the principles of meaning construction that received attention – the texts were predominantly treated as sources of factual information. There are only a few studies of *Sturlunga saga* as a narrative discourse, and the most significant of them are shaped by the assumption that the text presents the society’s downfall, and that Iceland’s union with Norway in 1262 was regarded as a tragic loss of national independence. This opinion is challenged in the present study, which aims at providing a better understanding of how the events are evaluated in the contemporary sagas.

The tumultuous events of the thirteenth century and the union with Norway certainly influenced the Icelanders’ perception of their identity, but not necessarily in a negative way. The present analysis is based on the hypothesis that the intensified contact with Norway in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries broadened the Icelanders’ cultural, social, and political horizons, as Iceland became better integrated into Scandinavian and European structures. In such a situation, the Icelanders’ perception of their identity was increasingly shaped by their relationship to the European social space. It is argued here, however, that it was not a relationship of opposition and isolation, but rather one of interaction and integration. Integration does not contradict individuality, but it motivates a clearer definition of this individuality – a definition of what makes the given society special and unique in comparison with the other societies that it interacts with, what it has in common with them, which events from its history have defined what it has become, and which historical personages can be perceived as the bearers of the society’s identity. These are also the central questions of the present study.

Primary sources

The study focuses on *Sturlunga saga*, *Arons saga Hjörleifssonar*, *Árna saga biskups*, and *Lárentius saga biskups*. It also works with *Jóns saga helga*, *Þorláks saga helga*, *Guðmundar saga biskups*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, and the fragment of *Magnúss saga Hákonarsonar*.

The bishops' sagas have previously been studied mainly in the context of continental and translated hagiographic literature, as documents reflecting the saints' cults. This approach has undeniably been fruitful, but it has also been a limitation to our understanding of the corpus of the contemporary sagas as a unified whole, and it has left some of the texts overshadowed by others. In the present study, it is the similarities, rather than the differences between the bishops' sagas and the secular contemporary sagas that receive attention, and both groups of texts are treated as equally relevant sources of medieval Icelandic cultural history and cultural memory.

Methodology

The theoretical background of the study is first and foremost Hayden White's theory of narrative discourse as a medium that endows the depicted events with new layers of meaning, and Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory as *knowledge about the past that is related to a concept of identity*. Understandably, Old Norse memory studies have focused primarily on the dominant "founding narratives" of the medieval Icelandic society – the texts dealing with the settlement of Iceland and with the Saga Age, as well as on genres dealing directly or indirectly with mythology and the ancient past. In the present study, on the other hand, it is the contemporary sagas and the bishops' sagas that are analysed from this perspective.

A new methodological contribution by the author of the present study is the theory of *narrative types*, which is intended to contribute to overcoming the limitations posed by the generic division of saga literature, and which is based on the approach to saga literature as cultural memory. In the reception of the sagas, specific horizons of expectations are created not only by what modern research has labelled as various saga genres or subgenres, but also by what can be called the *narrative types* of sagas. The definition of individual narrative types is based on the interconnection between structure and meaning: stories with the same overall structural pattern are likely to focus on the same themes and values as well, regardless of whether they deal with distant or recent events and whether they take place in Iceland or Norway. Some narrative types are more typical for some saga genres than for others, but the boundaries of the narrative types are not the same as the boundaries of the genres. For the present study it is central that the contemporary sagas contain the same narrative types as the sagas and *þættir* of Icelanders, and they also share some narrative types with the kings' sagas. Among the narrative types shared by these genres are the *conflict story*, the *travel story*, the *outlaw's story*, the *court poet's story*, the *royal retainer's story*, and others. These narrative types, known already from the sagas dealing with the Saga Age, connect the recent events to their typological parallels from older history, integrating them into cultural memory. Each narrative type is associated with a certain horizon of expectations, which is then either fulfilled in the narrative, or the narrative deliberately creates a distance from it. That way, the narrative constructs new layers of meaning that transcend the meanings of the individual events, connects these events to already existing narratives of the past, and expresses ideas and values that have a universal significance within the society's cultural memory.

Narrative types and Icelandic identity in the depictions of internal relations

In the twelfth century, the character of the social relationship between the Icelandic local leaders and their assembly men began to change. The chieftains, who had originally been their assembly men's legal representatives, gradually became local magnates with territorial power. Centralization of power was a natural aspect of all medieval European societies, but scholars have typically perceived this development of Icelandic society as a sign of social disintegration or downfall and regarded the increasing intensity of conflicts and the difficulty of reconciliation as the central theme of the contemporary sagas. Here it is argued, on the other hand, that the sources do not present the centralization of power as a social decline, and that the increased intensity of conflict is not their central theme. The texts admit that a certain degree of inevitable destabilization marked the time of social transformation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but they focus on the stabilizing elements that still existed in the society. The sagas show that the most significant stabilizing element is the presence of mediators, who aim at non-violent conflict resolution by agreement or arbitration, and of decisive peaceful chieftains, who actively prevent armed clashes and maintain peace.

The mediator

The most frequent narrative type in saga literature is the conflict story. Its structural pattern has been described by Theodore Andersson, who defines six stages of the conflict story: (1) introduction of the protagonists, (2) development of a conflict, (3) violent culmination of the conflict, (4) revenge, (5) reconciliation, and (6) aftermath (Andersson 1967, 6–29). It is the reconciliation, often accompanied by negotiation and mediation, that is the most important part of the structural pattern of the conflict story on the level of *discourse*, although the preceding parts are more central on the level of *plot*.

In the conflict stories that take place in the Saga Age, individual mediators usually receive relatively little attention. The negotiation that leads to an agreement at the end of the conflict is either initiated by one or both of the conflicting parties themselves, or the text only briefly mentions that reconciliation was encouraged or mediated by “the people” or by “good-willed men”. The character type of the mediator is not entirely unknown in the sagas of Icelanders, but it is quite exceptional there. The conflict stories in the contemporary sagas, on the other hand, put much more emphasis on individual mediators – characters who stand outside of the conflict but intervene in it, terminating violence and contributing to reconciliation. This difference doubtlessly partly reflects the historical reality of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the society became more differentiated than in the Saga Age. I believe, however, that the difference also stems from an increased focus on the moral aspects of conflict and reconciliation in the contemporary sagas. That is not exactly a distance from the original narrative type of the conflict story, which also emphasizes the importance of reconciliation, but it is a change in the degree of interest in the values that lie behind the stabilizing forces in the society. For this reason, the forces that contribute to reconciliation and peace are embodied in the contemporary sagas as individual mediators who can express their opinions in direct speech, so the ideas about the importance of peace can be explicitly formulated, not just inherently implied, in the texts.

In the typical conflict story, the escalation of violence is not prevented until serious bloodshed has taken place, and peace is usually renewed only after the killing of at least one of the protagonists of the saga. The reconciliation is nevertheless of great importance because it prevents further escalation of the conflict, terminates the cycle of revenge, and re-establishes social harmony. This structural pattern of the narrative type creates a horizon of expectations that can be either fulfilled or disrupted in the contemporary sagas.

Þorgils saga ok Haflíða focuses on the contrast between the careless and violent troublemaker Már and the mediators who aim at preventing violence. Because of Már's immoderation, Haflíði is drawn into a dispute with Þorgils, but after some clashes, they reach a reconciliation with the help of mediators. The saga follows the narrative type of the conflict story, but it creates a distance from its horizon of expectations by leaving out the violent culmination of the conflict. The structural pattern of the narrative type leads to the expectation that the mediation and reconciliation will take place only after the killing of one of the protagonists, but in *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða*, the mediators manage to bring about a reconciliation before the decisive armed clash takes place. This distance from the violent element of the narrative type emphasizes the idea that despite the gradually increasing concentration of power in the Icelandic society, social order is still maintained by efficient internal mechanisms of conflict resolution. The text implies that discord is caused by individual troublemakers, who may partly and temporarily disrupt social equilibrium. The saga does not, however, show any general moral disintegration, because the troublemakers are counterbalanced by mediators, and the protagonists' occasional immoderation is counterbalanced by their final wise decisions.

Guðmundar saga dýra does not create any significant distance from the horizon of expectations of the conflict story, following its whole typical structural pattern. The central theme of the saga, however, is not the fragility of peace, but rather the significance of a strong leader as a mediator. Compared to the conflict stories that take place in the Saga Age, the saga pays more attention to individual mediators and shows their continuing, although not entirely constant, presence in the society. The text depicts two levels of leadership – Guðmundr dýri as an influential local chieftain, and Jón Loptsson of the Oddaverjar as a central authority, to whom Guðmundr can turn for arbitration when his own power proves insufficient. After Jón's death, the society lacks a central authority, so instability and violence increase. The saga thus illustrates the importance of centralized power.

Svinfellinga saga is shaped by the structural pattern of the conflict story and does not create any significant distance from it. Like all the typical conflict stories, it depicts some degree of inevitable violence, but while the armed clashes are central for the plot of the saga, the discursive level of the conflict story draws attention to the society's internal mechanisms of conflict resolution and renewal of peace. Compared to the conflict stories in texts dealing with the Saga Age, *Svinfellinga saga* focuses more on the moral aspects of the conflict, which are reflected in the deliberately foregrounded contrast between the mediator and the instigator or between the attacker and the victims. The continuing presence of the stabilizing forces in the society is embodied by the central mediator, Abbot Brandr, who is repeatedly praised by references to the public opinion, and although he fails to avert bloodshed, his arbitration restores social harmony after the killing.

The peaceful chieftain

The character type of the peaceful chieftain represents a positive counterpart of aggressive, excessively ambitious men, who refuse to terminate conflicts by reconciliation and prefer violent clashes. He is often mocked by his opponents for being unmanly because he rejects violence, but there is a clearly marked difference between this mockery and the narrative voice of the saga. In the narrative, peacefulness is not presented as a sign of weakness or cowardice, but rather as a strong moral code – to apply his moral principles in practice, the protagonist must be decisive, determined, and courageous, because the morally right solutions are usually not the easiest ones. The peaceful chieftain is characterized not only by avoiding violent clashes himself, but also by his effort to dissuade others from violent behaviour. He repeatedly actively participates in arranging reconciliation, and he predicts the tragic consequences of violent acts. He is morally superior not only to his enemies, but also to his friends or kinsmen, who do not follow his advice and bring about their own downfall by their excessive aggression.

The inherent tragic aspect of the peaceful chieftain's story is that the protagonist is often unable to fulfil his ambition to bring about peace – either because he fails to convince others to follow his advice, or because he lacks the determination to complete his well-meant act at the decisive moment. The tragedy is completed when the peaceful chieftain himself becomes a victim of violence, although he has never committed any violent act. This tragic horizon of expectations of the peaceful chieftain's story is fulfilled in some contemporary sagas, but others create a distance from it; their unexpectedly optimistic ending then underlines the continuing social superiority of the morally positive values represented by the peaceful chieftain.

Sturlu saga presents the contrast between a peaceful and aggressive chieftain. Bad leadership is embodied by Einarr Þorgilsson, who lacks the ability and will to uphold social order, tolerates the presence of outlaws and criminals in his region, ignores the needs of his assembly men, and behaves violently in conflicts with his opponents. Good leadership, on the other hand, is represented by Sturla Þórðarson the elder, who is honourable, moderate, and peaceful. Due to the obvious difference in their personality, people prefer Sturla, and Einarr loses popularity and is eventually defeated in a fight. *Sturlu saga* is shaped by the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story, but it creates a distance from its horizon of expectations. The narrative type usually has a tragic ending when the peaceful chieftain becomes a victim of violence despite his effort for peace. In *Sturlu saga*, however, the protagonist not only survives the conflict, but he even gains the local power that previously belonged to his aggressive opponent. This distance from the tragic aspect of the narrative type contributes to the generally positive evaluation of the social development in the saga.

Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar follows the structural pattern of the peaceful chieftain's story without creating any significant distance from its horizon of expectations, and the moral evaluation of the depicted events that is inherent in this narrative type is underlined by predictions and foreshadowing, which emphasize the condemnation of violence. Despite some degree of difference in focus, both the separate *Hrafns saga* and the *Sturlunga saga* redaction express the same central idea that a good chieftain should always value the common good more than his own power. In the *Sturlunga* compilation, the focus on the character type of the peaceful chieftain is emphasized by the parallel between Sturla Þórðarson the elder, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, and Þórðr Sturluson. The meaning created by this parallel replaces the introductory part of the separate *Hrafns saga*, which draws attention to the contrast between

good and evil. The overall meaning of the narrative is therefore not changed by the omission of the introductory part in the *Sturlunga* redaction. The narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story reflects an awareness of the presence of both stabilizing and disruptive forces in the society. Although the promoters of peace do not always win, their presence in the society counterbalances the disruptive forces and embodies the positive values that hold the society together.

In *Íslendinga saga*, the aggressors and troublemakers are less clearly defined; the same man can be presented as an attacker in one episode and as a defender in another. Nevertheless, the text still criticizes the attackers and expresses sympathy with the defenders, regardless of who they are. The story of Þórðr Sturluson follows the inherently tragic narrative type of the peaceful chieftain's story, and the tragic aspect is partly present in *Íslendinga saga* because Þórðr's kinsmen disregard his advice and consequently suffer a violent death. The story does, however, create a distance from the horizon of expectations of the narrative type, as Þórðr does not become a victim of violence himself, and his life ends with a peaceful, natural death. Due to such a distance from the tragic element of the peaceful chieftain's story, the story emphasizes the social significance of the values and attitudes that Þórðr represents. The way in which Þórðr lives and dies counterbalances the bloodshed that is also depicted in *Íslendinga saga*, underlining the presence of morally positive and socially beneficial values in the society of the Sturlung Age.

The ideal of the peaceful chieftain is a significant element of the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory because it highlights moderation as an essential value that enables a society with weak central power to maintain or renew peace. This character type emphasizes the presence of positive moral values in the society that was destabilized at the time of transformation, but still retained its central stabilizing forces. The character type of the mediator embodies the society's potential for positive development and the belief that after the turbulent period of transformation, social stability would not only be renewed, but also strengthened, and the whole system would be improved. The thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Icelanders could identify with the values that the peaceful chieftain and the mediator embodied, and they could perceive them as a counterweight to the less positive aspects of their society and its history.

The contemporary sagas' focus on these character types and on the significance of powerful social leaders was of great importance in shaping the memory of the recent past and in constructing a meaningful connection between this past and the present at the time when *Sturlunga saga* was created. Since *Sturlunga saga* was compiled after the establishment of the union with the Norwegian kingdom, it can be assumed that its overall positive portrayal of strong leadership is a comment on the results of the power concentration depicted in it, expressing a general satisfaction with the centralized rule. At the same time, however, the compilation does not condemn the old system either – the depiction of increased instability before and during the Sturlung Age is counterbalanced by the focus on the positive aspects of the society. Due to its emphasis on the character types that embody the internal mechanisms of upholding social cohesion, the compilation creates an image of history that the intended audience could proudly claim as “their own”. The text could thus provide its contemporary recipients with a meaningful relationship to both their present and their recent past.

Narrative types and Icelandic identity in the depictions of contact between Iceland and Norway

The character of the contact between Iceland and Norway changed at the beginning of the Sturlung Age. Icelanders had always visited the Norwegian royal court as travellers, court poets, or royal retainers, but direct political alliances between the Icelandic chieftains and the Norwegian rulers became a reality only when the chieftains started seeking the Norwegian rulers' support in the Icelandic power struggle. This was a consequence of the power concentration in Iceland and of the intense internal conflicts during its final stage, when the chieftains needed a higher authority that they could turn to for support or arbitration. This development naturally led to an increased importance of the contact with Norway for the construction of Icelandic identity. The contemporary sagas written in the second half of the thirteenth century or later therefore focus on the theme of contact much more than the earlier contemporary sagas that were discussed in the previous chapter. Their protagonists embody various aspects of the contact between Iceland and Norway; the narrative portrayals of these identity bearers contribute to the construction of the medieval Icelanders' self-image within the broader horizon of the Norse social space.

Ari Þorgeirsson: The jarl's sword and shield

The narrative type of the royal retainer's story creates a parallel between Ari Þorgeirsson in the A-redaction of *Guðmundar saga biskups* and similar characters known from sagas dealing with the distant past. The choice of a specific narrative type is a conscious decision that forms the meaning of the story, making it more than an account of a specific individual's life. The noble fighter is significant as an embodiment of the Icelanders' confidence and fearlessness, but the structure of the narrative shows that such images of strength were not connected to ideas of a desire for independence and isolation. On the contrary, what distinguishes the noble fighter from a barbarian sword-wielder is his loyalty to a Norwegian monarch. This loyalty gives his strength a purpose, without which it would be nothing but brutality – courage in a monarch's service is perceived differently from aggression against fellow Icelanders. Within cultural memory, the character type of a royal retainer who gains glory in a ruler's service contributes to defining Iceland's relationship with the monarchy. The narrative underlines the Icelandic's voluntary decision to enter the ruler's service and his genuine loyalty to the ruler when his sword is most needed. The difference between passive subordination and active loyalty is very significant in this context.

Ingimundr Þorgeirsson: The traveller

The most significant narrative type in the contemporary sagas is the travel story, which depicts a transition from marginality to acceptance. The travel story shows a dichotomy between Icelanders and Norwegians, but it is based on the idea of regional, rather than national identity – both groups are regarded as inhabitants of the same cultural space, and a difference is made between its centre and periphery. At first, the Norwegians regard the Icelandic traveller as primitive or simple-minded due to his marginality, but he proves their mockery wrong by demonstrating his abilities, such as cleverness, eloquence, or courage. Subsequently, he gains

the king's favour and a prestigious position. The travel story reveals some of the Icelanders' insecurities, but it expresses their wish for intensified contact with the broader Norse cultural space, as well as their belief that their qualities can be appreciated there. It inherently reflects a positive attitude to the relationship between Icelanders and the Norwegian monarchy. It underlines the development of this relationship from alienation to alliance, and it draws attention to the mutually beneficial character of this alliance.

Aron Hjörleifsson: The outlaw

The theme of marginality plays a central role in the outlaw's story. It focuses on the protagonist's position as an outcast, which in the contemporary sagas reflects the Icelanders' peripheral position. The members of a peripheral society do not lack personal qualities that could enable them to succeed, but their situation does not allow them to fully use their abilities, because they are isolated from the world. The narrative type of the outlaw's story is inherently tragic, but in *Aron's saga Hjörleifssonar* it is combined with the inherently optimistic travel story. Due to this combination, the text deliberately creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the outlaw's story, so the optimistic ending becomes surprising, and more attention is drawn to it. The outlaw's story in combination with the travel story turns into a narrative of a development from an outcast to a respected royal retainer. It is a narrative of overcoming marginality and of successful integration into a larger whole. The tragedy of isolation is contrasted to the benefits of contact, and the text emphasizes the fact that both the Icelander and the king actively seek to establish a mutual relationship, and that this relationship is beneficial for both – the Icelander receives a prestigious position at the royal court, and the king gains a courageous, clever, and loyal retainer.

Snorri Sturluson: The court poet

The story of the court poet is the most confident presentation of Icelandic identity. Whereas the typical travel story, and especially the outlaw's story, focus on the Icelander's marginality, the court poet's story emphasizes his extraordinary intellectual abilities, his special privileges at the royal court, his freedom in deciding to enter a particular monarch's service, and his ability to negotiate the conditions of the mutual relationship with the monarch. This narrative type shapes the account of Snorri Sturluson's first journey to Norway, which focuses on how Snorri prevents an imminent conflict between Iceland and Norway by his diplomatic skills and how his influence is increased by his alliance with the Norwegian rulers. The second half of Snorri's story, on the other hand, is shaped by the inherently tragic narrative type of the jarl's story because Snorri's fate becomes inseparably intertwined with the fate of his Norwegian ally, Skúli Bárðarson. Nevertheless, although this combination of the two narrative types creates a distance from the optimistic horizon of expectations of the court poet's story, it does not negate its meaning. The court poet's story with its focus on the Icelander's free will and active approach to the forming of political alliances interprets even the second part of Snorri's story, showing that he was not a passive victim. On a more universal level, this implies that the Icelandic society is not presented as a passive victim either: the forming of political relationships with Norway is depicted as the Icelanders' own initiative.

Þórðr kakali Sighvatsson: The fighter

Þórðr Sighvatsson is presented as a typical warrior-aristocrat, and the structure of *Þórðar saga* as a conflict story draws attention to the importance of mediators and arbitrators for the renewal of peace at the end of a dispute. During the Sturlung Age, nobody in Iceland was powerful enough to be able to arbitrate the most influential chieftains' conflicts, so they needed to turn to the Norwegian king for arbitration. The narrative type of the conflict story leads the audience to assuming that one of the opposing chieftains will be killed by the other, but *Þórðar saga* creates a distance from this horizon of expectations: the protagonist's conflict with both Kolbeinn Arnórsson and Gizurr Þorvaldsson ends by their agreement to accept the king's judgement. Þórðr's role is then transformed and he eventually gains power over Iceland by peaceful means; ironically, however, he dies the same day. From the perspective of Þórðr as the protagonist, the story ends tragically, but it is a different kind of tragedy than the one found in the conflict stories in the sagas of Icelanders. From the perspective of the society, however, Þórðr's death receives a deeper meaning in the narrative: it represents the end of the era of warrior-chieftains and implies that they have been replaced by peaceful representatives of royal rule. This is presented as a positive development.

Þorgils skarði Böövarsson: The royal retainer

The ideal representative of royal rule is portrayed in *Þorgils saga skarða*, which combines the royal retainer's story with the peaceful chieftain's story. The first part of the saga follows the structure of the royal retainer's story – the Icelander is reckless and ferocious when he arrives in Norway, but during his stay at the royal court, the belligerent youth realizes that he will gain more honour by loyalty to the retinue and to the monarch than by stubbornly furthering his individual ambition. He proves his worth in the king's service and in a quest away from the royal court, and he is appreciated by the monarch. Nevertheless, the saga creates a distance from the horizon of expectations of the narrative type by showing that the protagonist does not gain his good reputation in royal service primarily by fighting or killing on the king's behalf, but rather by preventing destruction or bloodshed with the help of the king's authority.

This distance from the original narrative type is further developed by the combination of the royal retainer's story with the peaceful chieftain's story. In the second half of the saga, Þorgils promotes non-violent power relations with the help of the king's authority also after leaving the retinue and returning to Iceland. He is presented as a model of the right balance between decisiveness and moderation, as he is firmly determined to carry out his tasks as a leader, but he always seeks peaceful solutions when they are possible. Þorgils' significance as a peaceful chieftain is underlined by a parallel with Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson and by allusions to a saint. The parallels between the representatives of the ideal of the peaceful chieftain show how events are connected to each other in cultural memory, not because there is a direct causal link between them, but because of their typological similarity. Such typological connections allow the narrative discourse to create meanings that are more universally significant than the individual events. On this universal level, the personal development depicted in *Þorgils saga* illustrates the gradual transformation of the Icelandic power system from constant rivalry among aggressive chieftains to centralized rule in the hands of peaceful royal representatives.

Gizurr Þorvaldsson: The jarl

The narrative type of the jarl's story presents an ambiguous portrayal of its protagonist – he is brave and decisive, but he threatens social stability by his excessive greed for power. In the typical jarl's story in *Hákonar saga*, this character type is represented by Skúli Bárðarson, who embodies the traditional Norse ideal of the warrior-aristocrat, while King Hákon Hákonarson represents the new ideal of the righteous king (*rex iustus*), the king as a peaceful lawmaker and judge. The portrayal of Gizurr Þorvaldsson in *Íslendinga saga*, on the other hand, combines elements of both types: he shares some features with the character type of the jarl and some with the ideal of *rex iustus*, not in the sense of character development, as in the case of Þorgils, but rather in the sense of both types being present simultaneously.

The ideal of *rex iustus* is reflected in the strikingly positive portrayal of the relationship between Gizurr and the farmers and common people. The narrative emphasizes the jarl's role as the land's protector, which is even depicted with a hint of a semi-miraculous divine intervention. The portrayal of Gizurr's relationship with the king, on the other hand, is much more ambiguous and contains some of the typical elements of the jarl's story. This narrative type illustrates the ambivalent position of a chieftain who is eager to be honoured by the king but reluctant to accept the obligations that stem from his alliance with the king. The character type of the jarl, together with the character type of the warrior-aristocrat, is associated with the old social model, which was in the process of being replaced by centralized monarchy. The elements of the newly introduced ideal of *rex iustus*, on the other hand, represent the freshly established centralized rule. Gizurr can be regarded as the man who brought about the end of the Sturlung Age and the beginning of the new social system in Iceland, so it is fitting that he is depicted as a borderline figure.

Sturla Þórðarson: The last skald

Significantly, the narrative type of the court poet's story, with its confident portrayal of the Icelander and its focus on the positive relationship between Icelanders and the monarchy, shapes the stories of the two Sturlungs who faced a serious conflict with the king in reality – Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Þórðarson the younger. The structural pattern of the narrative type covers up some of the political aspects of their actions, which can be regarded as unwise decisions – Snorri's choice of party in the Norwegian power struggle, and Sturla's violent attack on a fellow royal vassal. First and foremost, however, the narrative type has an interpretive and evaluative function. Snorri's unlucky end, as well as Sturla's involuntary journey to the royal court, could have served as a basis for creating a narrative of Iceland's opposition to Norway, if such an interpretation of the relationship to the monarchy had been relevant to the society. Instead, however, the texts follow the narrative type that inherently expresses the most positive attitude to the monarchy. It is also hardly a coincidence that the structural pattern of the court poet's story is dominant in the texts that form the very beginning and end of the narrative of Iceland's direct political contact with Norway in *Sturlunga saga*. As such, it frames the whole narrative and contributes to the construction of its meaning, turning it into a narrative of Iceland's active role in the formation of the union with Norway.

Árni Þorláksson: The politician

Árna saga biskups is shaped by the narrative type of the conflict story with its focus on the mediator. The mediators act on two levels – the level of local disputes between farmers, and the level of the state. The local level is characterized by strong elements of continuity: the farmers turn to Icelandic secular or ecclesiastical authorities for support in their conflicts, and the authorities strengthen their power by effective conflict resolution. On the level of the state, especially in the conflict between secular and ecclesiastical power, it is the king who plays the role of the mediator. That is not a new element after the establishment of the union either, as *Sturlunga saga* shows that Icelandic chieftains turned to the king for judgement already before. That means that the situation within the union that is described in *Árna saga biskups* was a gradual continuation of the processes that had started around the beginning of the Sturlung Age, and the union was only a formal confirmation of the conditions that were a result of a natural social development. *Árna saga* only places even more emphasis on the idea that as soon as the royal power is weakened, the conflicts are renewed, and social order is threatened.

Lárentíus Kálfsson: The loyal cleric

Lárentíus saga is shaped by the narrative type of the travel story with its focus on how the protagonist uses his own abilities to gradually gain a prestigious position and the favour of the highest authorities in Norway. Due to the saga's ecclesiastical subject matter, the role of the supreme authority is played mainly by the archbishop, although the text also mentions that the king appreciated Lárentíus' learning as well, and the jealous courtiers from the typical travel story are replaced by the canons. Lárentíus' loyalty to the archbishop is rewarded by protection when he is verbally or physically attacked, and in the second half of the saga, when Lárentíus arrives in Norway to receive consecration from the new archbishop, the initial alienation between them is followed by a reconciliation. Despite the saga's focus on matters of the Church, the message of the narrative remains the same as in the typical travel stories – it underlines the idea that despite disagreements between individual Icelanders and Norwegians, the overall relationship between the two lands is positive and beneficial. The Icelanders can overcome their marginality by an intensified contact with Norway, where their qualities can be appreciated.

Icelandic saints and identity

The previous studies of the bishops' sagas have mostly been limited by a focus on the religious meaning only, but here it is argued that these texts also reflect ideas related to the formation and transformation of Icelandic identity. In the absence of kings, the Icelandic bishops always played a significant role as central figures in the definition of Icelandic identity, but the role of the saintly bishops in the medieval Icelanders' cultural memory was transformed in the changing social environment. The main role of the native saints was to confirm Iceland's spiritual equality to other lands, but in the earliest hagiographic sagas of the saintly bishops, this is expressed only indirectly. The memory of the bishops as saints is constructed mainly with a focus on Iceland alone, while the relationship to Norway is depicted only on the political level, not on the spiritual level. This implies that the sense of identity formed by these texts is mainly constructed within the boundaries of Iceland; its position of equality within the Christian

world is indirectly attested by the existence of local saints, but it is not explicitly foregrounded in the texts.

Later sagas, on the other hand, focus more on the saintly bishops' role as "national saints" and on direct comparison between Iceland and Norway in terms of spiritual worthiness. The reason for this development must be that Iceland's relationship to Norway was intensely negotiated at the time around the establishment of the union, and it was viewed with some amount of ambiguity. On the one hand, the Icelanders acknowledged the mutual bond and enjoyed the benefits of being integrated into the European social structures through their link to Norway. On the other hand, however, the union must have increased the Icelanders' awareness of their peripheral position within the Norse social space, and this understandably brought about a feeling of insecurity and a need to re-construct their identity in a broader context. The saintly bishops were still regarded as significant identity bearers, as increased emphasis on Iceland's spiritual equality to Norway could serve as a suitable compensation for the Icelanders' feeling of marginality.

At the next stage of the development, the attention turned from Iceland's spiritual equality to Norway to Iceland's position within the broader Christian world. The boundary of the perception of identity was broadened again – the border between Iceland and Norway became secondary to the border between the North and the rest of the world. That means that the development of the boundaries within which the medieval Icelanders constructed their identity consisted of three partly overlapping main stages. The first stage was a focus on Iceland as an individual society and on its positive qualities. The second stage was an intensified perception of Iceland as a periphery and Norway as a centre. The final stage was a perception of the Norwegian-Icelandic realm as a periphery and mainland Europe or the places of biblical history as a centre. The effort to overcome marginality remained central in the society, but at the final stage, it was the North as a whole that aimed at a more profound integration into the broader European social and cultural space. As before, integration did not mark a loss of individuality, but it added new layers of identity to the existing ones.

Conclusion

Change and continuity

The scholarly debate about the social and political development in twelfth- to fourteenth-century Iceland has mainly focused on change, while the substantial elements of continuity have received little attention. The present study has shown, on the other hand, that the contemporary sagas present a balanced image of change and continuity, both on the level of historical reality and on the level of the construction of identity.

On the level of historical reality, the most significant element of change that characterizes the Sturlung Age in comparison with the preceding centuries is the formation of direct political alliances with the Norwegian rulers. Subsequently, Icelanders first acknowledged the Norwegian king's authority in practice and then formally accepted royal rule, which marked the end of the Sturlung Age. The centralized government in the union with Norway provided the Icelandic society with the executive power that it had lacked before. These elements of change are, however, counterbalanced by significant elements of continuity on the level of

historical reality. The concentration of power during the Sturlung Age was not a sudden, abrupt transition caused by external intervention, but rather a gradual continuation of a long-term internal process. During the Sturlung Age, this process culminated and brought about the development of territorial power. Nevertheless, the overall structure of the society and of the settlement consisting of individual farms was retained. Even after the formal establishment of the union between Iceland and Norway, Icelandic political leaders, such as Jarl Gizurr Þorvaldsson and Bishop Árni Þorláksson, still used many elements of the old chieftain system to maintain their power in Iceland. The farmers still turned to the local leaders for support in their mutual disputes, while the leaders turned to the king for advice and arbitration.

On the level of the construction of identity, the main element of change is the increased importance of contact with other societies for how the Icelandic society perceived itself. Such contact of course always existed to some extent in historical reality, but it receives less attention in the earliest contemporary sagas. The later contemporary sagas, on the other hand, focus on the theme of contact much more. They highlight the Icelanders' active role in the formation of their relationships with Norway, and they illustrate the values that the Icelanders gained by establishing these relationships and that became important for their identity. The main element of continuity on the level of the construction of identity, on the other hand, is that the various layers of Icelandic identity were all retained. Icelanders defined their identity socially, culturally, and geographically on several levels that were not mutually exclusive but existed parallelly and their relative importance could vary depending on the context of where the Icelanders were and whom they were interacting with. All these layers of identity were constantly newly formulated in the narratives that were created from recent historical events, but in principle they remained the same from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. When new elements of identity were added by the acceptance of royal rule and by integration into a broader Norse social space, they did not disrupt, contradict, or replace the existing layers of identity, but they co-existed with them; this is a strong element of continuity. This balance between change and continuity can only be fully appreciated through a careful study of the contemporary sagas as historical records, as narrative discourses, and as sources of cultural memory.

The contemporary sagas and cultural memory

The Icelandic and Norwegian social development has usually been studied as two separate histories of two "national states". Here it has been shown, however, that the contemporary sagas present a different perception of the social development and a different concept of social space. An awareness of certain political, social, and cultural boundaries between Iceland and Norway doubtlessly existed, but according to the narratives, the dominant aspect of collective identity was the concept of a shared social space. Within this social space, the inhabitants of each area performed certain functions and defined their position in a broader or narrower perspective, depending on the situation. The medieval Icelanders were aware of being in a peripheral position within the Norse social space, not least due to their geographical isolation and lower economic prosperity. Their literature implies that they regarded this peripheral position as a much more significant problem than the question of political independence, at least at the time when these narratives were created. It is the dichotomy between marginality and integration that can be regarded as the central theme of many medieval Icelandic texts. These texts reflect

or construct various cultural myths that are linked to collective identity. In texts dealing with Icelandic or Norse history, it is the myth of origin, the myth of the Free State, and the myth of otherness and contact that contribute to the constitution of identity most significantly.

Identity was not timeless and unchangeable, but individual aspects of it developed in the course of time, which was also reflected in changes in the narrative discourse. The cultural myths that were already established in the society could be partly modified; that did not mean that they lost their meaning, but that they received new meanings that reflected new social circumstances. The present study has shown how the three dominant medieval Icelandic cultural myths were developed in the contemporary sagas. The original cultural myths were not negated by the transformed ones but remained valid as images of the past; they provided Icelanders with a history that they could be proud of. That way, a meaningful relationship was constructed between the past and the present: they were qualitatively different, but both were irreplaceable in the formation of collective identity. Every individual story became integrated into the narrative of the whole society that included events from both the distant and recent past and the present.

The contemporary sagas create a dialogue between recent events and the narrative tradition of the sagas of older times, which is also in a dialogical relationship to the events of the distant past. That means that there are two narrative intermediate stages in connecting the present to the past – the existence of narratives of the distant past, in which certain cultural myths are formulated, and the creation of narratives of recent events, in which these cultural myths participate in the forming and re-forming of collective identity through a dialogue between the present and the past. These intermediate stages are necessary steps in the integration of recent events into cultural memory.

The narrative types and identity

When the historical events are transformed into a narrative discourse, the description of historical reality is shaped by certain literary conventions, which are not mere clichés, but rather deliberately chosen interpretative devices. The events are incorporated into the saga tradition and into the memory of the past by being fitted into certain narrative types. Each narrative type creates a certain horizon of expectations, which is then either fulfilled or modified in the narrative. That way, the narrative constructs meanings that transcend the meanings of the individual events. The narrative types create parallels between stories that take place in different times and situations, and that allows the recipients to view history not just as a chain of events, but as a meaningful unity with elements of both continuity and development.

By employing the same narrative types as the sagas dealing with the Saga Age, the contemporary sagas create a connection between the recent and distant past, thus integrating the recent events into cultural memory and underlining the similarities between the past and the present. At the same time, however, the contemporary sagas also create distances from the horizons of expectations of the given narrative types, thus pointing out the differences between the past and the present and creating a dialogic relationship between them. That implies that the thirteenth-century Icelandic society appreciated its roots in the Saga Age but was also aware of the development that it had undergone throughout the centuries.

In this context, development is not presented as a loss of the past, but as a step that enables the definition of the past as being qualitatively different from the present – that is why it can be conceptualized as the past. The imperfections of the past are not concealed, but the narratives nevertheless focus on its positive aspects, so it can serve as a source of identity, as a past that the society can proudly accept as *its own*. The narratives imply that the new system could not exist without the old one, the present could not exist in its current form without the past. At the same time, the narratives create the image of a development that had a definable result: a change of order, a transformation of the system by a gradual process, rather than by an abrupt transition. The existing system is presented as a continuation of the old one, but with some elements of change. That can be regarded as the only possible meaningful relationship between the past and the present that can be formulated in a historical narrative because a narrative that denies development does not allow for the formulation of any distinction – and that means relationship – between the past and the present, but a narrative that denies continuity rejects the past and its value for the present. Knowledge of past events does not automatically constitute a history, but cultural memory always constitutes a history by contextualizing the events. The contemporary sagas are more than a mere sum of accounts of events, they are a memory of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries as a time of continuity and contact.

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