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External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Lucie Korecká

“Continuity and Contact. The Contemporary Sagas and Cultural Memory”

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I. Brief summary of the dissertation

The dissertation discusses the construction of Icelandic cultural identity and memory in the so-called contemporary sagas, a group of texts written in the thirteenth and fourteenth century that describe recent secular and ecclesiastical Icelandic history. In an analysis of different ‘narrative types’ in the corpus of contemporary sagas, the study argues that the recent past is narrativized and conceptualized by means of narrative patterns that are also used for the description of the more remote past of the settlement period (ninth and tenth century), but that these patterns are transformed and put into new contexts. Different from the dominating position in research, the overall hypothesis of the dissertation is that the contemporary sagas conceptualize the recent period of Icelandic history in positive terms and the socio-political changes as a desirable development rather than as a period of moral and social decay.

II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

A study of the late-medieval Icelandic contemporary sagas from a memory-theoretical perspective is a highly welcome and relevant enterprise. This part of the Old Norse corpus that deals with nearly contemporaneous times has up to the present day been neglected as a resource for the study of cultural memory, and extant studies have instead focused on texts that treat more remote parts of the Icelandic past. The contemporary sagas are also rather neglected in literary studies and still predominantly treated as historical sources, and it is laudable that this dissertation discusses the



narrative construction of these sagas in great detail. Overall, the study has a lucid structure and presents well-informed and rich analyses of a large corpus of texts. The following detailed discussion of the dissertation will present some points of criticism that however do not influence the overall evaluation of the study as relevant contribution to the field.

III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

The dissertation is introduced by three introductory chapters that present the corpus and historical context (chapter 1), the theoretical framework and state of research (chapter 2) and finally an initial interpretative summary of the events described in the contemporary sagas (chapter 3). This introductory part is followed by three analytical chapters (4-6) that quantitatively as well as qualitatively form the main part of the study and that are rounded up by a conclusion (chapter 7).

The bibliography and references in the study illustrate that Lucie Korecká is well-read in the field and takes account of publications in English, Scandinavian languages as well as Icelandic. The dissertation meets all formal standards of academic writing. It is written in adequate academic English, and the bibliography and references meet scholarly standards. The quotations from the Old Norse sources and other texts are virtually flawless, and the Old Norse quotations are accompanied by adequate English translations of the author. One minor peculiarity is that the author has decided to render the quotations from Stefán Karlsson's edition of *Guðmundar saga biskups* in normalized form (cf. p. 99), a rather unusual decision in Old Norse scholarship.

The theoretical framework of the dissertation is a combined memory-theoretical and literary approach in the tradition of structuralism. This theoretical framework could have been unfolded in more detail and more explicitly in the introductory parts of the dissertation, and the introductory theoretical considerations could have been employed more actively in the following analysis. Furthermore, theoretical approaches to the central aspect of identity are completely absent in the study.

The temporal closeness of the time of writing and the described time in the contemporary sagas offers the unique possibility to analyse the construction of memory in a period that falls into what Jan Assmann has called the floating gap between communicative and cultural memory, that is the transition of memory from a personal remembrance of eye witnesses of events to an externalized memory, fixated in (written) tradition. This peculiar constellation of the contemporary sagas is not addressed explicitly in the dissertation and could have been exploited more pronouncedly in the design of the study. This also connects to the use of sources in the dissertation: The study discusses initially the corpus, consisting of the secular contemporary sagas (in particular *Sturlunga saga*), the *Biskupa sögur* (Bishops' sagas) and the Kings' saga *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*. The study relates to the individual sagas of the compilation of *Sturlunga saga* that are commonly identified in scholarship, most of which are however not transmitted as separate texts, but only in the compilation of *Sturlunga saga* that is commonly dated to the beginning of the fourteenth century and transmitted in two manuscripts dating from the mid-fourteenth century (AM 122 a and b fol.). While Korecká reflects potential influences of the compiler in the beginning of the fourteenth century – however with the result that she generally declares the influence of the compiler as being neglectable (cf. e.g. p. 88ff) – she only peripherally reflects the actual manuscript transmission of *Sturlunga saga*, as well as



other texts in her corpus. Many of the texts under scrutiny are only transmitted in manuscripts from the mid-fourteenth century or later in different textual constellations, and it would have been highly relevant to analyse potential changes in the construction of identity in this transition period from communicative to cultural memory with a departure in reflections on the transmission of these texts between the thirteenth and fifteenth century.

Another methodological issue has to be addressed: One basic premise of the study that is early introduced is that the contemporary sagas ought not to be employed as historical sources only, but rather treated as narrativizations and interpretations of events (cf. a.o. p. 23ff). The study itself oscillates however constantly between renderings of historical events based on the descriptions in the contemporary sagas (as they are our only sources of this period) and analyses of these descriptions as narrative constructions. This becomes particularly obvious in the rather odd chapter 3 that presents a summary of the historical events of the period that precedes the following narrative analysis of these very 'events'. Repeatedly in this chapter and beyond, Korecká reasons about the motivations and inner motions of several historical characters (see e.g. p. 58: "Skúli probably felt..." and "Skúli surely felt..."). In this regard, the study could have been more consequent in treating the descriptions as narrative constructions throughout without relating them back to and framing them with presentations of a historical reality that can hardly be grasped beyond the narratives in the contemporary sagas.

Apart from relevant memory-theoretical research, the presentation of the theoretical framework in chapter 3 refers in particular to Hayden White's credo that all history is narrativized and to Hans Robert Jauß' reception theoretical notion of the horizon of expectations, both of which however only implicitly inform the structure of the argument in the following analysis. It becomes only obvious in the main part of the study itself that the main methodological foundation of the literary interpretation of the corpus that also forms the structural backbone of the whole dissertation are structuralist approaches in the tradition of Theodore Andersson (and followed up by amongst others Joseph Harris and Joonas Ahola, both of which are also referred to in this dissertation). Following these structuralist interpretations of different parts of the saga tradition, the structure of the main part of the dissertation identifies different 'narrative types' that are employed in the contemporary sagas. The notion of 'narrative type' is suggested by Lucie Korecká as a new approach to previous genre-centred approaches to saga literature (cf. p. 11). An explanation of the notion or its relation to previous (structuralist) scholarship is lacking, but can be deduced implicitly from the analysis.

In a predominantly chronological order, the three main chapters (4-6) identify the presence of different narrative types in different contexts and periods covered in the contemporary sagas. Chapter 4 is preoccupied with narrative types in descriptions of inner-Icelandic events, chapter 5 analyses Icelandic-Norwegian contacts, and chapter 6, by far the shortest of the three chapters, finally takes up narrative types in the Bishops' sagas. Chapter 4 and 6 are structured by the discussion of individual texts, while chapter 5 rather discusses individual (historical) characters. The main narrative types identified are the types of mediator, peaceful chieftain, royal retainer, outlaw, fighter, court poet, jarl. Convincingly, Lucie Korecká argues that these narrative types are all known from sagas preoccupied with earlier periods in Icelandic history, predominantly the Family sagas and the Kings' sagas, but that the narrative types are recontextualized and recombined. In doing so, the contemporary sagas relate to previous stages in history and construct a complex, multilayered memory of the recent past. The

finding that the contemporary sagas make use of similar narrative patterns as the Family sagas is not completely new and has been discussed in detail in particular by Úlfar Bragason and Jesse Byock. Both of these authors were indebted to the structuralist tradition of Theodore Andersson, but modified it in their analyses of Family and contemporary sagas in order to do justice to the complexity of the narratives. Their considerations seem also to inform the present study, but might have been employed fruitfully more explicitly in the methodological layout of this dissertation. The rather traditional literary take could furthermore have gained by (a more systematic) inclusion of more recent narratological approaches to the sagas. For instance, Anita Sauckel's current research on *Figuren des Dritten* in saga literature (based on Albrecht Koschorke's concept) would have been highly relevant in this context, or also Fotis Jannidis' historical narratological studies on *Figur und Person* (2004). Korecká alludes repeatedly to differences in plot and discourse in the sagas (e.g. p. 68, 72 et al.), but these considerations could have deserved a much more prominent and systematic place in the dissertation and would surely have yielded highly relevant insights.

The analysis of the different narrative types in chapters 4 and 5 consists of nuanced expositions of the textual corpus with detailed quotations that present a number of insightful findings. Korecká's departure point is that the different narrative types in the sagas are arranged in relation to each other in order to interpret and evaluate different social models. A number of positive narrative types present a positive image of recent social developments of centralization and integration into the Norwegian monarchy and reject the previous ethics of feuding and fighting in favor of the ideal of mediation, peaceful leadership and royal retinue. The tragic narrative types of the jarl and the fighter are presented as outdated social models that are replaced by new models such as the *rex iustus* that Korecká also identifies as relevant for the description of central Icelandic characters, namely Gizurr Þorvaldsson (p. 144 et al.). In the course of the analysis, several reinterpretations of the corpus are suggested. Amongst others, Korecká argues that Þórðr Sturlason as ideal type of the peaceful chieftain forms a key figure of *Íslendinga saga*. The inclusion of the Bishops' sagas in the analysis furthermore reveals that the same narrative patterns are employed in secular and ecclesiastical contexts and that these texts are part of a generic continuum that draw on and combine different textual traditions (cf. p. 172f). The rather short chapter 6 finally opens up for yet another interesting aspect and discusses the construction of notions of sanctity in the Icelandic Bishops' sagas. Korecká convincingly argues that the narrativization of the contemporaneous bishops Árni and Lárentíus draw on a new narrative type of Icelandic saint as developed in relation to the earlier Icelandic bishops, in particular Þorlákr (cf. p. 191).

Based on these detailed readings, Korecká identifies in the conclusion of the dissertation in chapter 7 rather briefly and slightly abruptly several cultural myths that carry the construction of Icelandic cultural identity and memory. Korecká denotes these myths as the myth of origin, myth of the Free State and myth of otherness and contact (cf. p. 203f). She furthermore identifies three different subsets of the myth of origin that relate to either a shared Norse origin from the pagan gods, the settlement or finally a unified Norwegian-Icelandic realm. As Korecká shows (implicitly) in her detailed discussion in the main part of the study, these cultural myths are combined into complex layered constructions and employed both in the construction of the remote past – the settlement period – and, in reformulated form, in the construction of the recent past. This important conclusion could have been elaborated with profit or also been developed more explicitly already in the main part of the dissertation.



The main argument of the study is that the contemporary sagas do not present a story of social decline, but rather a positive interpretation of recent historical events that relates back to the past and at the same time illustrates differences and changes over time. It is not least the chronological arrangement of the analysis that supports the rendering of a teleological grand narrative: Korecká identifies three main stages in the narrativization of Icelandic identity and the construction of cultural memory in the contemporary sagas (cf. p. 200): a first stage in the first half of the 13th century, in which Iceland is conceptualized as an individual society with positive qualities, a second stage in the latter half of the thirteenth century in which Iceland is conceptualized as periphery and Norway as centre and finally a third stage in the fourteenth century in which Norway and Iceland are presented as periphery and mainland Europe as the centre. Accordingly, Korecká argues, the early secular and ecclesiastic sagas of the first half of the thirteenth century deal with internal matters, the sagas from the latter half of the thirteenth century focus on the contact with Norway, while the later Bishops' sagas are preoccupied with the integration of Iceland into the Christian world (p. 202).

Again, a more critical approach to the identification, dating and transmission of individual sagas and compilations could have led to more nuanced results that might have questioned this grand narrative presented in this study (a transmission-informed approach is however realized in relation to the bishops' sagas (cf. e.g. p. 195)). And while Korecká extensively dwells on the socio-political context of the thirteenth century, she does not explicitly take account of the major changes from 1318 onwards and thus in the period of transmission of these texts: From 1318 onwards the Norwegian realm was in dissolution and merged in a union with Sweden and towards the end of the fourteenth century also Denmark. This changed socio-political setting could have been explored and related to the findings presented in the study that indicate an increasing identification as Norse or Norwegian-Icelandic in the corpus. Similar identifications can be found in other texts transmitted in the mid- and late-fourteenth century, such as the compilation of *Flateyjarbók* (as discussed by Steffi Würth/Gropper and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe) or also fourteenth century legal compilations (as discussed by a.o. Lena Rohrbach). Also, it seems at least debatable whether it is appropriate to denote the new political framework post 1262 as a "Norwegian-Icelandic union" (cf. e.g. p. 52, 97, 154f, 177), that is a political entity of equal-ranking between the Norwegian monarchy and Iceland. Recent research on the historical context by amongst others Patricia Boulhosa and others indicates that a strong Icelandic position as mediated in *Gamli sáttmáli* and other documents does not date from the thirteenth century, but also from later times and are in fact part of the construction of a cultural memory from the latter half of the fourteenth century onwards.

IV. Conclusion

The criticism uttered in this evaluation does not imply that the dissertation does not meet academic standards, but is rather an expression of the potential inherent to this study to trigger further preoccupation with this corpus. The critical points mentioned might be the starting point for a continued discussion of the subject. Lucie Korecká presents a thorough coherent reinterpretation of the corpus of contemporary sagas that invites for future continuation. The submitted dissertation is a valuable original contribution to the field of saga studies that offers solid knowledgeable re-readings of the corpus of contemporary sagas. The theoretical framework of the study is solid and offers an



innovative combination of memory-theoretical and structuralist methods that could have been enhanced by the inclusion of more recent narratological approaches and a more distinct reflection of the complex material transmission of the texts.

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.

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