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External examiner's report on Lucie Korecká's thesis 'Continuity and Contact: The Contemporary Sagas and Cultural Memory' (Supervisor: Jirí Starý)

In the submitted work, 'Continuity and Contact: The Contemporary Sagas and Cultural Memory', Lucie Korecká argues that the contemporary sagas construct 'the founding narrative' of the Norwegian-Icelandic Union, a narrative that does not univocally set forth the political change as a negative development nor give the impression that the union resulted in a loss of Icelandic identity. It is argued that an Icelandic identity developed with an orientation towards, first, the local (Icelandic), next the regional (Norwegian) and finally towards the wider European social space. Lucie Korecká demonstrates that the contemporary sagas can be read with similar narratological tools as sagas that deal with the more distant past. Literary patterns and stories are used and reused across genres, showing that these sagas continue an already established literary tradition. It is argued that the contemporary sagas contain myths (a myth of origin, a myth of the free state, and a myth of otherness and contact) that are all decisive for the construction of Icelandic cultural memory.

Lucie Korecká's thesis is the result of a thorough effort and the author presents an interesting perspective on the contemporary sagas. My critical points are not so much concerned with the analyses of the story patterns of the individual sagas and the typological connections that arguably exists between different sagas, nor with the thesis' stylistic or idiomatic expression, which is clear and concise. Rather they concern the overall framing and the presentation of the analytic results, as well as one of its hypotheses.

The thesis has affinities with structuralism, but the author does not really identify this connection. The thesis centers its analyses and conclusions on structural patterns in the contemporary sagas, but is only superficially concerned with structuralist approaches as they have been carried out in saga scholarship, particularly from the 1960s (but also earlier and later). (A useful survey is found in Lars Lönnroth 'Structuralist Approaches to Saga Literature' in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World*. Ed. J. Quinn, K. Heslop, and T. Wills, Brepols (2007), 63-74). Relevant in this discussion are, among others, works by Theodore Andersson and Joseph Harris, whose works are included in the thesis (Andersson 1967, 1970 and Harris 1972, 1976), but only locally in connection with treatments of 'the conflict story' and 'the traveler's story'. A more global incorporation and an increased awareness of structuralism and an identification of its relevance at the beginning of the thesis would be helpful. The





idea that cultural memory is nourished by cultural myths (as proposed by Jan Assmann) has already been argued in saga scholarship with regard to other saga types, but the thesis offers news to the field by bringing together structuralist approaches and theories about cultural memory, a conscious reflection on this new combination would place the thesis more clearly in saga research.

The notion of genre should be presented more carefully and with reference to more scholarship. The analytic part rests on certain premises, where Lucie Korecká goes beneath the level of genre and talks instead of structural patterns and narrative types (e.g. 33 and 38). She avoids a discussion of the 'largely limiting category of saga genres' (p. 36) and argues that the narrative types dealt with in the thesis constitute intertextual foci points that exist across genres. This is a very timely point of view, with which the author enters directly into a current debate in Old Norse scholarship, as it stands, however, this seems not to be fully recognized by the author. Again, the work will gain if it identifies its relevance for, and its position in, Old Norse scholarship, with a more explicit awareness of the state-of-the-art of sagas studies (in this case of genre notions). This way the author will be able to justify the relevance of, and the actuality of the thesis, more clearly. – An early discussion of sub-classes versus genres is found in Margaret Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, vol. 2. Odense University Press, 1998, ch. 3. An even more relevant publication is *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*. Ed. M. Bampi, C. Larrington, Sif Rikhardsdottir, D.S. Brewer (2020), where several articles are of direct relevance for the submitted work.

The thesis' beginning (especially, Chapters 1 and 3) has much focus on the historical background; it gives standard knowledge about Icelandic and Norwegian history and outline central themes in the relationship between Norway and Iceland, which is talked about as a 'necessary historical introduction' (p. 11). As it is now, the title promises a thesis about cultural memory, but it takes a while until this focus becomes dominant, and at times, I become uncertain if the author's main interest is in Icelandic history, in medieval literature, or in cultural memory.

The concept 'cultural memory' deserves a more explicit theoretical treatment. The concept is defined in the Methodological section with reference to Jan Assmann's notion of foundation narratives, and this aspect of cultural memory is a consistent background in the analytic part of the thesis. It is shown that different story types construct myths that become a part of Icelandic cultural memory, and that they define how the past and the more recent time were constructed by way of an available set of story-types. Another dimension of cultural memory that could be more directly incorporated in the discussions about typologies, shared textual patterns and intertextuality is the notion of 'textual remembrance'. In the thesis the 'inherent intertextuality of medieval literature' (p. 38) is elaborated on with references to H.R. Jauss, but it would be equally relevant to discuss intertextuality as/and 'the memory of literature', which is a concern in cultural memory studies (this would be an interesting addition on p. 38-40 and again on p. 177 – as well as more locally in the analytical sections). This expansion of the concept would further substantiate how cultural memory is formed through textual repetition. – About this approach see e.g., A. Erll and A. Nünning, 'Concepts and Methods for the Study of Literature and/as Cultural Memory', in *Literature and Memory*, ed. A. Nünning, M. Gymnich, R. Sommer. Francke Verlag (2006).

The author is aware that the contemporary sagas do not treat the long gone past, but she maintains that these sagas reveal the first attempts to define the Sturlung Age as 'past'. There is no need to be cautious here. The fact that texts treat the recent past does not disqualify the cultural memory-perspective, which can deal with recent as



well as remote events. The thesis often mentions the past-present relationship, but barely tells that cultural memory is about the future as well. What cultural memory does is not only to negotiate between past and present, but also to suggest ways to think about collective identity in the future. This 'third' temporal layer, 'the future', could be included in the discussion, not least to qualify the relevance of cultural memory-perspective for stories about nearly contemporary times.

The saga authors' choices and literary awareness is dealt with, emphasizing that the sagas are written literature. Still the term 'Saga tradition' is occasionally mentioned in the thesis. I am uncertain if this formulation includes both oral and written sagas, and if the agents in the textual culture (authors and audiences) are believed to continue the oral tradition of story telling, if they remediate the stories, or if they invent new patterns. In relation to this, and with a focus on media and cultural memory, is there reason to believe that the medium of the book and the technology of literacy was more powerful for the construction of cultural memory and collective identity than oral stories?

If the author considers to publish the thesis, I suggest that some choices are made which makes the cultural memory perspective stand out more clearly from the beginning, just as more explicit references to this theory could be made continuously when relevant in the analytical part, this at the expense of some of the discussions about the historical background in Ch. 1 – Ch. 3. In any case, a more firm positioning in either of the relevant disciplines, and a more clear priority of and hierarchy between the textual sources and medieval society respectively would make a stronger case.

It is an interesting point that the political union did not result in a loss of Icelandic identity, however, in a re-definition of this identity on certain points (p. 175 and p. 178-179). The Old Norse texts show that the same is the case after another major upheaval in Icelandic history, namely Christianization, a social transformation that is preserved in cultural memory as the result of the Icelanders own choice, and which leads to the incorporation in the narrated worlds of new types, but which do arguably, not cause a loss of identity. That such a reaction to key events is repeated could be made more explicit in the thesis, e.g. on p. 179, partly to support the argument that patterns and typologies exist in and across the texts, partly to make explicit just how pervasive the mechanism of re-interpretation (which happens in a constant dialogue between contrast and continuity) is in Icelandic memory construction.

The author suggests that Icelandic identity developed from a locally defined orientation over an identification with elements belonging to a broader Norse social space and later, after the instability of the Sturlung Age ended, from a wider European space (e.g., p. 11). The author concludes that: 'In the fourteenth century, on the other hand, this narrow Norse perspective is replaced by a broader perspective, in which mainland Europe or the essential places of Christianity, such as Jerusalem and Rome, are defined as the centre and the whole Norse Region is defined as the periphery' (p. 206). This is a matter of discussion, and I am hesitant to immediately accept the idea of a chronological development, a conclusion in the thesis that needs more nuancing and an increased awareness of counterarguments. To detect a chronological development based on literary analyses is in itself a complicated task, not least because of the manuscript situation, but also because the texts treated have different overall aims and different generic traits (which the author is aware of). For instance, sagas dealing with bishop-saints are due to their topic at one and the same time locally and universally orientated, showing that universal Christendom manifests itself at all places and at all times in the social space constituted as a *christiana terrena*.





While the sources analysed here, and the perspective imposed on these sources, may indicate a chronological development, other texts in the literary corpus (some of which are also included in the thesis) do not univocally support this idea of chronology, and I am not sure if the development suggested here 'shed light on more general tendencies' (p. 181). Icelandic identity may not have developed diachronically from a local to a European orientation and these social spaces, and a centre-periphery model, could have been synchronously present during the whole area of saga writing. Could it be that the textual culture from the outset defined Icelandic collective identity within a broad 'world historical perspective'? The author includes references to early history writing, such as *Íslendingabók* (supporting herself on, for instance, K. Hastrups ideas). But arguably even this work defines the Icelandic past only on the backdrop of a wider world and by way of typological structures that involve a wide-ranging social space. About this argument see Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Iceland, Norway, and the World', *Arkiv for Nordisk filologi* 132 (2017), 75-99 and Pernille Hermann 'Íslendingabók and History', in *Reflections on Old Norse Myths*, ed. P. Hermann, Jens Peter Schjødt and Rasmus Tranum Kristensen Turnhout (2007), 17-32.

And some short remarks: The author mentions the lack of literarily-minded treatments of *Árna saga biskups* (e.g., p. 24; as well as p. 164ff), a recent reading of this saga as literature is found in Richard Cole, '*Árna saga biskups* / Kafka /Bureaucracy / Desire', in *Collegium Medievale* (2015), 37-69. A relevant reading of *Lárentius saga biskups* which treats clerical power, and touches upon the Icelandic-Norwegian-European relationships, is in Joel D. Anderson, 'Eccleastical Government, carte blanche: Filling out forms in *Lárentius saga biskups*', in *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 15, (2019), 1-28. In bibliographies and in-text references Guðrún Nordal and Torfi Tulinius are conventionally treated as Icelandic names, like Guðrún Nordal and Torfi Tulinius and not (like in this thesis) as Nordal, Guðrún and Tulinius, Torfi.

To conclude, despite of the critical comments given here, I wish to mention that Lucie Korecká has convincingly argued that we must re-valuate the idea that the loss of political freedom was a 'tragic' event that lead to a loss of identity, just as she has confirmed the assumption that the contemporary sagas are indeed an integral part of saga tradition, sharing (but also changing) some of the literary features that are found in other saga genres. On the whole, it has been a pleasure to read this thesis, and my evaluation is that the submitted work 'Continuity and Contact: The Contemporary Sagas and Cultural Memory' meets the standards required of a doctoral dissertation. I can recommend the thesis for a public defense, and my proposed assessment of the work is 'Pass'.

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