

Old Icelandic Literature and Society

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Social institutions and belief systems of
medieval Iceland (c. 870–1400) and their relations
to literary production

PREBEN MEULENGRACHT SØRENSEN

translated by Margaret Clunies Ross

OLD NORSE AND OLD ICELANDIC

In the Middle Ages the language spoken in Iceland and the other Norwegian colonies in the West was Norse, most closely related to the southwest Norwegian dialects of Hordaland and Rogaland, where the majority of the settlers in these new lands had their origin. During the settlement of Iceland, and before Norway was united into a single kingdom, the Norse language was also spoken for two or three generations in those parts of the British Isles where people from the western parts of the Scandinavian peninsula had settled. The conventional term for this common language is *Old Norse*. After the introduction of Christianity it developed as a written language, more or less simultaneously in Iceland and Norway and in all probability also in the Orkneys, even though an original literature from the latter has not been preserved. It is common in a national context to speak of *Old Norwegian* and *Old Icelandic*, but the differences between the two written languages are small and without any literary significance. From a linguistic perspective it is therefore natural to speak of *Old Norse literature* as an entity that encompasses both Icelandic and Norwegian literature from before about 1400, and this can be set alongside other linguistically demarcated literatures, for example, Old English. From a literary point of view, however, a quite different picture reveals itself. Here Icelandic literature in comparison to Norwegian is so extensive, both in scope and originality, that in some connections, and not least the connection of ‘literature and society’, it is most practical to speak of *Old Icelandic literature*.

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We must keep in mind the fact that *Old Icelandic* is not identical with *Old Norse*, and that Icelandic literature cannot be clearly differentiated from the common West Norse literature in some areas. This is true of poetry from the Viking Age, which on the whole has been transmitted in Icelandic manuscripts, but which, in its origin, is older than the settlement of Iceland. The skalds from the oldest period were Norwegian, and at all events a portion of the eddic poetry that has been preserved must be presumed to have its roots in Norway or Denmark. Later, in the thirteenth century, Icelandic authors probably gained literary inspiration from the European literature which had been introduced into Norway and the Orkney Islands. Courtly culture was known in Norway in the time of Hákon Hákonarson (1217–63) through translations of French literature, including Thomas of Britain's *Tristan* and some of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances. This literature exerted an influence on sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendinga sögur*). A corresponding role as a meeting place for European and Norse culture was certainly played by the Orkneys. Here we find the earliest example of the renaissance of skaldic poetry in the poem *Háttalykill* (*Clavis rhythmica*), which was composed by the Norwegian-born Earl Rognvaldr kali and the Icelandic skald Hallr Þórarinsson, inspired by the European interest in language and metrics. Finally we must take into account a common connection between the parts of Old Norse literature. That is obviously true of religious texts, which were written both in Norway and Iceland. A second kind of official literature, the histories of Norwegian kings, were partly written as a Norwegian initiative, even though, for the most part, they had Icelandic authors, and they were certainly intended for a Norwegian public.

In what follows both the terms *Old Icelandic* and *Old Norse* will be used.

WHAT IS UNIQUELY ICELANDIC

Norse literature from the High Middle Ages occupies a special place in the European context for several reasons. It is extensive, varied and original and, from a modern perspective, of great artistic value. Important parts of it lack parallels in other places. That is the case with the poetry that Norway and Iceland had in common: skaldic poetry,

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which is the oldest elite poetry in Europe, and the mythological poems of the Elder Edda, that contain pre-Christian myths, which have not been transmitted to us outside Scandinavia. It is also the case with the uniquely Icelandic sagas of Icelanders, which exist in a highly developed narrative form that both continues traditional historical narrative and anticipates the novel. Almost the whole of this literature was written or at all events preserved in writing in Iceland, and it may appear paradoxical that it was created by a small farming population on the outskirts of Europe, far from the continent's towns and spiritual centres. Iceland itself had no towns. The size of the population scarcely exceeded 50,000 individuals at any time. The island lay many days' journey by ship from the nearest neighbouring countries, Norway, Denmark and the British Isles. The land was virginal and uninhabited, when the first settlers arrived, and the natural environment and the circumstances of life were in many respects quite different from what they were in the lands on the other side of the ocean, as its remarkable name, *Ísland* (lit. 'land of ice'), showed early on. Iceland was settled at the beginning of the tenth century, at a time when the neighbouring countries were being united into kingdoms with increasingly centralized powers. For reasons which are not entirely clear the Icelandic settlers had left these countries, and the society that they then built up was different from the old ones.

There have been two ways in which researchers have tried to explain this apparent paradox, of a copious and highly developed literature in a remote country, which was rather backward from an economic and technological point of view. The first way uses a comparative approach, the second a literary and sociological one. Using the comparative method, scholars have tried to discover the conditions that favoured the development of Icelandic literature in the literature of contemporary Europe. From a broad perspective it is clear that there is a connection, seeing that the precondition for Icelandic literature was writing in Latin and the literature and learning to which the Church's education had opened the door. We may assume that a part of the Icelandic population that gained such an education was also able to read other European literary languages, and we may therefore presume that both Latin literature and literature in the vernaculars were part of the background of learned Icelanders. There is special reason to consider medieval

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Icelandic literature in the light of the humanistic interest in language, poetry and philosophy which has come to be called the twelfth-century Renaissance (Haskins 1927). We can see there a source of inspiration for the preoccupation of Norse written culture with the oral poetry and stories of prehistory. On the other hand we can only be successful to a limited extent in finding concrete European exemplars for the secular Icelandic sagas, and not at all for the sagas of Icelanders.

Using the second, literary and sociological, approach, researchers try to account for Icelandic literature against the background of Iceland's historical and social circumstances. The argument is that an exceptional society, formed in exceptional circumstances, produced an exceptional literature. This view plays an essential part in the present chapter, but it must be emphasised that it does not offer a sufficient explanation on its own. The relationship between society and literature is not so simple, and it operates in both directions. We can probably see the Icelanders' historical experience and special social circumstances as a basis for their literature, but the literature was not only a consequence of that history. The literature also contributed to the shaping of history in a self-affirming process whereby a people with a special historical recollection and mode of thought made narratives about the past a meaningful part of their present.

LITERARY RENOWN

We may see that the present-day appreciation of the Icelanders' literary stature in the Middle Ages was corroborated by the testimony of their contemporaries. Early on it seems to have been an acknowledged fact that the Icelanders were a people with great historical knowledge and particular talents for the art of narrative and poetry. They wrote about their own history in the past and the present, and equally readily about Norwegian kings, the heroes of prehistory and the history of foreign countries. From the Viking Age they had become known in the Scandinavian countries as a people who composed poetry and told stories, and they probably considered themselves in this way too. How this view came about is not entirely clear. The oldest skaldic poetry we know is, as has been stated earlier, Norwegian, but as early as around the year 1000, at the time of the introduction of Christianity to

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Norway, the Icelanders had established a solid monopoly on court poetry both in Norway and Denmark. Numerous accounts in sagas of Icelanders and kings' sagas talk of Icelandic court poets and, considered as a whole, give a detailed picture of an institution which may have contributed to the creation of a notion of Icelanders as a nation of poets with an exceptional knowledge of language and history.

After the introduction of writing and the book in the course of the twelfth century that reputation conferred upon the skalds the status of oral *auctoritates* in matters concerning the history of the Scandinavian countries. The Norwegian Theodoricus monachus wrote the short history of Norway, *Historia de Antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*, about 1180, and he begins his prologue by laying stress on Icelanders and their poetry as the source of his narrative. He writes that the remembrance of kings is particularly lively among them, and that they have preserved these events in their old poems, 'qui hæc in suis antiquis carminibus percelebrata recolunt' (Storm 1880: 3). In the same way, in Denmark at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Saxo Grammaticus gave a place of honour among his sources to Icelandic narrators in the prologue to his history of Denmark, *Gesta Danorum*. He writes that the Icelanders compensate for external poverty with the gifts of the intellect by collecting and then disseminating knowledge about other nations' histories, and continues:

Cunctorum quippe nationum res gestas cognosse memoriæque mandare voluptatis loco reputant, non minoris gloriæ iudicantes alienas virtutes disserere quam proprias exhibere. Quorum thesauros historicarum rerum pignoribus refertos curiosius consulens, haud parvam præsentis operis partem ex eorum relationis imitatione contexui, nec arbitros habere contempsi, quos tanta vetustatis peritia callere cognovi. (Olrík and Ræder 1931: 5)

(They regard it as a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgment it is as elevating to discourse on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinised their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognized such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses; Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1979: 5)

It is most probably oral narrators that Saxo is referring to here, and

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when he emphasizes that they are Icelandic, and thus neither Danish nor Norwegian, this may be because, in his day, Icelanders had the status of authorities when it came to historical knowledge. It might appear that the distinguished and learned Latin scholar places the vernacular narrators at a distance with his remark that he has not considered it beneath his dignity to use them as sources, yet we should not understand it as arrogance but rather as an expression of the respect which is revealed by the whole of his reference to Icelandic narrators. Saxo does not refer to skaldic poems, and it is doubtful whether he made use of them. In Icelandic historical writing, however, citations of skaldic stanzas had become a firm convention from the end of the twelfth century. In the prologues to *Óláfs saga helga* and *Heimskringla* Snorri Sturluson stresses the poetry of the skalds as the best source for the ancient kings' journeys and achievements and at the same time casts doubt on the reliability of oral narrative. Skaldic stanzas had now become like a part of the sagas' *prosimetrum*, used as authentic witnesses from prehistory, rather than as sources in the modern sense.

Icelanders were not only renowned for their historical knowledge, however. They were also recognized as especially good story-tellers and authors. When, at the end of the twelfth century, King Sverrir of Norway wanted his own biography to be written, he chose the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson from the monastery of Þingeyrar to write the first part of the work. On a par with this, Sverrir's great-grandson King Magnus Lawmender engaged the Icelandic Sturla Þórðarson to write sagas about himself and his father, Hákon Hákonarson. We have no evidence to show whether Snorri Sturluson's conversations with Hákon Hákonarson and Earl Skúli in Norway during the years 1219–20 contributed to his writing of *Heimskringla*, but, in any case, most of the sagas about Norwegian kings were composed by Icelanders, and in Norway in the thirteenth century the writing of history can be considered almost completely an Icelandic speciality, just as, earlier, skaldic poetry had been. Icelanders were professionals, a kind of literary Swiss Guard, which was called upon when it became necessary to relate history in poetry or in writing. This position certainly contributed to the fact that, after 1200, Norwegians contributed so astonishingly little to Old Norse literature and preserved an independent tradition neither of skaldic poetry nor of saga writing. Even the literature that was

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written in the Orkneys was reshaped and taken over by Icelanders. We are indebted to them not only for the original authorship of the major part of Old Norse literature, but also for the fact that it was written down and preserved in its entirety in a manuscript tradition from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries.

TEXTUALIZATION

With Ole Bruhn 1999¹ we may use the term *textualization* for the double process which consists in a society's adopting writing as a social usage, and, as a consequence of that, understanding and construing social life, and society considered as a whole, as a text. This process was initiated in Iceland about 1100, and it initially embraced the common institutions of the country, the law, history and language. Over the winter of 1117–18, following a resolution of the Althing, work was begun on the editing and writing down of the country's laws. In the 1120s Ari Þorgilsson wrote the history of Iceland in *Íslendingabók* with guidance from the bishops, and about the same time information about the land's first settlers was gathered together and written down in *Landnámabók*. At some time in the course of the century a now unknown linguist wrote a treatise on the Icelandic language. This little book, which goes by the modern title of *The First Grammatical Treatise*, is a phonological analysis whose objective was to create an alphabet suitable for the Icelandic language. These secular works are, together with some religious writings of the Church, the oldest literature in Icelandic. They possess an ordering, authoritative aim, one in which the country is viewed as an independent entity, a kingdom without a king.

ORIGINS

Consciousness of one's surroundings and one's history, which written culture promoted, satisfied the Icelandic emigrant people's demand to define themselves as a nation with a place in the world and in Christian world history. The conditions necessary for dealing with this task may have already been in place in the collective memory of the land-taking. That made it possible for the Icelanders to write themselves into mainstream history from the perspective of their own traditions and

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with an emphasis upon their own assumptions and ideals, just as we see in *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*.

Íslendingabók is a pioneering work in which Ari marks out the main lines of a history that were never subsequently altered, selects the most important events, and establishes a chronology. His plan is evident from the chapter summary with which the book begins: I. Concerning the settlement of Iceland; II. Concerning the first settlers and the establishment of law; III. Concerning the foundation of the Althing; IV. On the devising of the calendar; V. On the division of the land into Quarters; VI. Concerning the settlement of Greenland; VII. On the coming of Christianity to Iceland; VIII. On the foreign bishops; IX. Concerning Bishop Ísleifr; X. Concerning Bishop Gizurr. The first five chapters deal with origins and the common institutions. The chapter about Greenland is included because the Scandinavian colonies in Greenland were Icelandic. The central chapter, which is also the fullest, is about the introduction of Christianity, and the last three chapters deal with the earliest history of the Church.

With the help of this common history Ari gives the Icelanders an identity as a people, and his exposition is carefully controlled by a strategy, which on the one hand is designed to show that the society is a whole, but on the other avoids giving it a hierarchical structure. Like a modern historian Ari had to begin his work with the beginning, that is, the question of when Iceland was first settled. For this reason he refers in chapter I to a certain Ingólfr Arnarson as the first land-taker; but immediately afterwards there follows a chapter which enumerates four settlers (one of them a woman) as representatives of the four Quarters. In this way Ari underlines the society's decentralized structure, in which no single person has the highest status.

Íslendingabók's exemplary coordination of the first settlers is carried through on a large scale in *Landnámabók*, of which book Ari was a joint author, according to a remark in *Hauksbók*, one of its later redactions. *Landnámabók* is a catalogue of the men and women who were the leaders of groups of settlers that sailed to Iceland and took new land there. In all approximately 430 colonists are enumerated in topographical order round the island. Information is given about the dimension of each separate piece of territory and the name of the first land-taker's farm. In the majority of cases it is also stated where the immigrants came

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from and often some of their ancestors and descendants are named. *Landnámabók* no longer exists in its original form. In the course of the Middle Ages it was rewritten several times and enlarged, especially with genealogical information and with concise narratives of the kind that we find expanded in a more detailed fashion in the sagas of Icelanders. *Landnámabók* had no counterpart in contemporary European literature, and there is no agreement on what its original purpose was. However, the work is an exemplary expression of the Icelanders' self-perception at that time in history when they were able, with the aid of writing, to gain an overview of themselves as a people with an origin. In the text the original plurality of families and farms was able to be thought of and represented as a whole. The book's consistently topographical arrangement with a systematic review of places and their names inserts the land itself as well as its inhabitants into history.

There is reason to believe that not all the information in *Landnámabók* is based upon reliable knowledge. The source was oral tradition from all regions of Iceland, and it may have been an impossible task to gather information about all original acts of land-taking more than two centuries after they had taken place. On the other hand, *Landnámabók's* systematic conception required all the land that was owned when the book was compiled to be described as part of the original land-taking. We may reasonably assume that some of the information in the book is invented with that goal in mind, for example, that a number of the names of the first land-takers are constructed on the basis of false place-name etymologies. However, this phenomenon only emphasises the work's achievement as a text. Just as *Íslendingabók* established the basis of the Icelandic people's oldest history once and for all, so *Landnámabók* gave written form to the very act of taking over empty and nameless territories. We find this textualization of the landscape again in the sagas, and it achieved a permanent meaning in the Icelanders' perception of their land.

Accounts of the land-taking were also an emigration history and, through that, a link with world history. The Icelanders took up the emigration narratives of world history with a special interest. *Íslendingabók* shows that Icelanders early on had knowledge of learned theories on the subject of the origins of royal dynasties in Troy. The book concludes with a genealogy, which traces Ari Þorgilsson's own Icelandic

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kindred back to the Swedish kings, the Ynglings, and, further, from them to Yngvi, king of the Turks, that is, to the heathen gods, that, in euhemeristic interpretation, were understood to have been kings in Asia. In his *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson supplements this idea with an etymology, which links the term *áss* for the Scandinavian gods with the word *Asia*, 'Asia'. According to this hypothesis, Óðinn led his people from Troy to Scandinavia, where their dynasties and their language became dispersed. Icelanders' interest in other peoples' history and in foreign historiography must be seen in this light. In one way they made the sum of world history their own by regarding themselves as descendants of the Trojans. From the perspective of literary consciousness, the idea that the Norse language could be considered as directly transferred from Troy took on special meaning. According to Snorri, Óðinn spoke the skaldic language, and he saw in skaldic poetry a genuine expression of the ancestral world picture and way of thinking, not only before the land-taking, but before the emigration from Troy (Clunies Ross 1987).

THE OUTSIDE WORLD

One of the objectives of *Íslendingabók* had been to show that Iceland was an independent land, at the same time as making it very clear that the people had an origin in the Christian world. This comes about through the book's emphasis on Norway as the country of origin, but in a manner that also demonstrates Iceland's independence. The connection is established in the book's first sentence, 'Ísland byggðisk fyrst ýr Norvegi á dögum Haralds ens hárfagra, Halfdanarsonar ens svarta', 'Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Harald the Fine-haired, son of Halfdan the Black' (Benediktsson 1968: 4). This happened in the years between 870 and 930. Thereafter we are informed that Ingólfr, the first land-taker, was a Norwegian, but we are given no information about his home base or his family. Thus no single dominating lineage leads back to the country of origin. The change in religion is explained along similar lines. The conversion to Christianity happens under pressure from Óláfr Tryggvason, but the decision is taken at the Althing by the Icelanders themselves and is represented as a purely political act.

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Íslendingabók mentions Irish monks, meaning hermits, who lived in Iceland before the Norse settlers, but did not wish to remain there because they did not want to be members of the same community as heathens. By this means Ari emphasises again that the Icelandic population was Norse, but he obviously found it necessary to come to a decision about the question of an originally Celtic settlement. It is probable that, in the course of the settlement itself, a not inconsiderable number of the immigrants came from the northern parts of the British Isles. *Landnámabók* gives information of a geographic or ethnic kind about approximately 270 land-takers, and 90 per cent of them are ethnic Scandinavians, the rest Irish or other Celts. However, it also appears that scarcely a quarter of the ethnic Scandinavians came from the Norse colonies in the British Isles, in the main from Celtic areas. At the same time, these numbers comprise only a very small, even if a significant, part of the total immigrant population, which was perhaps between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals. Add to this the fact that the small group of settlement leaders was predominantly male and all were farmers of high social status. Thus they cannot by any means be considered a representative sample of the population. It is reasonable to presume that there were more Celts among the women and the lower social groups than the above-given percentage suggests, because the young Norse men, who had earlier settled in Ireland and on the Scottish islands, had married indigenous women and had taken local people as servants and slaves. It was these families and households, settled on both sides of the North Sea, who colonized Iceland, and we may understand the new Icelandic people, not as comprising exclusively Norwegian emigrants, but as part of a people that had been settled on both sides of the North Sea for several generations. The settlement of Iceland may be seen most naturally as a link in a westward expansion which began early in the Viking Age and which also embraced the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Faroes, the Hebrides, the Isle of Man and Greenland. Later these territories entered the Norwegian sphere of interest and finally became parts of the Norwegian kingdom, and Norwegian influence became dominant.

From a literary perspective the Celtic element in the origin of the Icelanders has given occasion for many considerations. One hypothesis considers skaldic poetry as inspired by Irish elite poetry (Bugge 1894),

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another sees the Scandinavian myths of the gods and legends of heroes as influenced by Irish poetry and legend (Bugge 1881–89). Icelandic saga narrative has also been connected with Irish traditions (Bugge 1908). None of these hypotheses have convinced everyone, and, apart from some few loanwords and place-names there is no trace of the Irish language in Iceland.

RELIGION

Christianity was officially introduced into Iceland in the year 1000 (or according to an alternative computation in the year 999), less than a century after the establishment of the new society. It happened, according to *Íslendingabók*, by means of a majority decision at the Althing, and thus as a peaceable political act. Two bishoprics were established, one in 1056 at Skálholt in the south, and another in 1106 at Hólar in the north. In the earliest period the Icelandic church was subject to the archbishop of Hamburg–Bremen. From 1104 it belonged to the Danish archbishopric of Lund and after 1154 to the Norwegian archiepiscopal see in Trondheim. Both internally and in relation to foreign countries the Church contributed to political centralization. The law of tithes and the system of individual church ownership, which gave the secular chieftains a substantial portion of the Church's revenue, strengthened the domestic concentration of land and power. After 1154 the Church was laid open to Norwegian influence, and the Christian conception of the state was able to act in opposition to the structure of Icelandic society, because it presupposed that a people had a king, who could exercise secular power on God's behalf. In this way the Church contributed in the long run to the disintegration of the free state; but, characteristically enough, it was from the first subordinated to the Icelandic constitution insofar as the two bishops took their seats in the Althing's legislative assembly side by side with the chieftains, and it was not until after 1230 that the bishops succeeded in freeing themselves from the dominance of the secular chieftains.

We know very little with any certainty about the Icelanders' religion before Christianity. Grave finds show us that a majority of the population were heathen, but *Landnámabók* also mentions Christian immigrants, and it reports that their descendants lost their faith. In the

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literary sources the change in religion is not represented as a radical breach. Ari Þorgilsson, for instance, tells in *Íslendingabók* that for a transitional period it was permitted to sacrifice to the heathen gods, to expose newborn babies and to eat horse meat. In consideration of the fact that this book was approved by the bishops, this information bears witness to a considerable tolerance, not only in the period after the change in religion, but also in the Icelandic scholarly environment in Ari's own time. It was accepted and even found profitable for such recollections of heathendom to be set down as a part of Iceland's history. In this tolerant attitude we may find part of the explanation for the phenomenon whereby traditions from the time before Christianity, not least skaldic poetry and poems about the heathen gods, could survive the change in religion and continue to be remembered until they were recorded in the literature of the thirteenth century.

Our knowledge of narrative and poetry in Iceland before the change in religion depends exclusively on indirect evidence. We may assume with a high degree of probability that skaldic poetry and eddic poetry lived on in oral tradition until they were written down in manuscript in the thirteenth century. At all events, Scandinavian runic inscriptions show that the verse forms were in use from the ninth century and probably earlier. The circumstances which led to the poetry's written preservation in any form can be attributed both to the Church's liberal attitude and to the interest in the history, language and poetry of the past, which shaped the High Middle Ages in Iceland. The poems gained meaning as part of the memory of the past, and, as has been mentioned above, skaldic poetry in particular experienced a renaissance as a genuine expression of the language, religion and conception of the world of the Icelanders' heathen forefathers. It is from this point of view that Snorri Sturluson wrote a poetics of skaldic verse and reproduced the myths of the gods in his *Edda*.

CONSTITUTION AND ETHICS

A key to the understanding of the Icelanders' exceptional circumstances is to be found in the form of society they chose for themselves. The constitution is briefly described in *Íslendingabók*. We find more detailed information in the legal code *Grágás*, which is preserved in fragments

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from the end of the twelfth century and as a whole in two manuscripts from the second half of the thirteenth century.

The political and social structure of Icelandic society resembled Norwegian farmer society before Norway became a state (to the extent that we have knowledge of it), but the Icelanders did not organize their community as an imitation of the one they had left behind. Rather, it was a re-formation, which took a different direction from the evolution of society in Scandinavian and British lands. The constitution that the new settlers resolved upon was both innovative and more archaic than those of the old countries. What was new was the absence of a king or any other single leader, and thus there was no collective exercise of power. The most important principle was a decentralized distribution of power and a corresponding emphasis on the integrity of the individual human being.

Business of common concern was transacted at the things or open air assemblies, where the farmers could meet. There were twelve (later sixteen) local things around the country, in addition to a thing for each of the four Quarters the land was divided into. The Althing was a common assembly for the whole country and took place over two weeks during the summer. Here the legislative assembly, the *lögretta*, met together. Before the foundation of the bishoprics, the only official position was that of the law-speaker. He was chosen for three years at a time and his duty was restricted to the oral recitation of the law at the Althing and for other ceremonial functions.

Debates at the things were conducted by chieftains with the title of *goði* (pl. *goðar*). In the beginning there were thirty-six *goðar*, while the number was later increased to forty-eight. Their power was not defined in the law on a territorial basis, apart from the fact that three *goðar* belonged to each local thing. Their strength lay in a client relationship between the chieftain and a number of farmers, who had entered into an obligation to support him. They were called thing-farmers, because one of their duties was to accompany their *goði* to the thing. All farmers were obliged to be associated with a *goði*, but every farmer had the right to choose his *goði* himself and to make it known once a year at the thing if he had attached himself to a new one. At the Althing the *goðar* met in the legislative assembly and they appointed farmers to sit as judges in the juridical courts. Thus the chieftains held legislative power in

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common and indirectly had influence over the judiciary. The title *goði*, which is derived from the heathen word for a god, *goð*, suggests that the chieftains also had a religious function as cult leaders before the introduction of Christianity.

Just as all farmers had to be attached to a *goði*, so all other free men and women, that is, those who did not own land, were obliged to be members of a farm community as a farmer's servants, but they had the right to change their situation on the moving days twice a year. In this way the whole population, apart from the slaves, was organized into a common social structure, but they also possessed a comparatively large measure of freedom of choice, at least in accordance with the law. The chieftains and thing-farmers were bound together in a relationship of loyalty, as were the farmer and his wife with their servants. The chieftain and the farmer were responsible for their people, and the latter in their turn had to support the former in conflicts.

The strongest and most important relationships of loyalty were between family members. These were not able to be cancelled and substituted with new ones, though family relationships could be extended through marriage and new alliances could be established. For those who were servants and other landless people the community based on the farmstead was certainly more important than kinship with individuals who lived elsewhere, because it gave better protection; but for the farmers kinship was the fundamental social relationship. Society's principal juridical and economic institutions, marriage, maintenance, inheritance and settlements and the receipt of penalties, were all vested in the family, and the same was true of the blood feud. In day-to-day business thing groups and the farmstead society were also most important for the farmers, but in critical situations in life, at betrothal and marriage, in conflicts and death, the kin group and its inescapable obligations came into force.

The Icelandic laws gave the individual great formal independence in decision-making and, in contrast to the Norwegian laws, the Icelandic codes placed all free men and all free women on the same level, when it came to the right to revenge or penalties for infringements or killings, irrespective of the individual's social or economic status. The key concept was *mannhelgi*, that is, an inviolability or integrity, which distinguished the free from slaves. It was not a matter of freedom in the

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modern sense, as defined, for example, in terms of human rights. It was above all a freedom from being violated.

Along with the legally based right to inviolability went the duty to take vengeance, if a violation had actually taken place. In the society of the Icelandic free state, the blood feud was a principle of law of considerably wider scope than in the Scandinavian countries at that time, and, in accordance with that principle, the form of Icelandic society is imbued with an extremely archaic characteristic. The ethical basis of the blood feud can be summed up in the Norse words *virðing* and *sómi*. The first means literally 'valuation', but, when used of humans, it can be translated by 'esteem, reputation'. The second word means literally 'that which is befitting'. *Sómi* is the good behaviour and conduct which confers esteem on a person. Nowadays we generally use the word 'honour' to refer to this ethical standard. Honour implies that individuals make decisions about themselves and their affairs and take responsibility for them; but, since the individual is also acting under the appraising eye of other people, the action is dependent on the common social norms that the individual strives to comply with. Where there is no strong responsible power to enforce social norms, the peace of society depends on free men and women behaving in accordance with them, under pressure from the collectivity's esteem and the desire of the individual to gain the collectivity's recognition to the highest degree possible. From an ideal perspective, this is how a society functions in which honour is the dominant ethical principle. The risk involved with this form of social order is that it depends absolutely on the individual human being, and that order therefore breaks down and turns into conflict if the members of society ignore the social contract based on honour, or if the individual is involved in a collision of duty between conflicting bonds of loyalty. Such conflicts and crises are the principal themes of the sagas that the Icelanders wrote about themselves.

THE HISTORY OF THE FREE STATE

Both possibilities, peace and conflict, lay within the Icelandic constitution, and both were realized in the course of the commonwealth period from 930 to 1264. In the first period, up to the beginning of the twelfth century, judging by the general picture presented in sagas of Icelanders,

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the land was marked by numerous local disputes and feuds between individuals and families, but the society as a whole functioned in accordance with the way it had been established in the law, and as is represented in idealized fashion in *Íslendingabók*. In its overall view, this book is itself an expression of the fact that there were secular and spiritual forces at work at the beginning of the twelfth century that desired peace and regulated affairs on the basis of the original constitution. Indirectly, *Íslendingabók* perhaps also demonstrates the necessity to emphasize that original order. The germ of the breakdown of the free state was already present in the increasing concentration of power that characterized the age of Ari Þorgilsson. Gradually, the disputes came to involve whole districts and eventually the whole country, and the constitution ended up working against the ideals that were embodied in it, because it could not prevent specific individuals amassing large landed properties and having many thing-farmers under their control. Peace could not be maintained without a strong central authority, and, in the first half of the thirteenth century, civil war broke out between the most powerful men and families, without any one of them being able to gain a definitive victory over the others. Of necessity the war of attrition for control of the country had to come to an end when the Icelanders submitted to the royal authority that the Icelandic constitution had shut out, and in the years 1262–64 the thing assemblies recognized the Norwegian king as Iceland's overlord in a series of peaceable decisions.

It is difficult to appraise the immediate cultural meaning of this change of political system. The most important consequence for the majority of the population was that there was peace in the land, and that supplies of timber, grain, iron and other vital commodities from Norway were secured. For the time being the common people's way of life and outlook did not change. In the highest echelons of society, however, among the hitherto autonomous chieftains, the change in political system immediately forced a new self-perception. For them the loss of independence had been an historic rupture, which was to be compared in the future with the great epochs of the past, the land-taking and the change of religion. It was this stratum of the population that undertook the writing of literature, and there is thus good reason to see the crisis in and dissolution of the free state as part of the literary context.

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The attitude of national romanticism, which has shaped our view of Iceland's history and literature in the Middle Ages throughout the major part of the twentieth century, has considered the period after the dissolution of the free state as a time of cultural and literary decadence. That was not at all the way in which contemporary Icelanders saw it. It is more accurate to speak of new directions. In the course of the fourteenth century a new literature came to be written in Iceland, sagas of ancient times (*fornaldarsögur*) about the legendary and heroic age in Scandinavia before the settlement of Iceland, and foreign stories with comparable themes now got the chance to be written in manuscript. There was a trend towards the fantastic and the fictive. Literature was freed from the requirement that it be anchored in the historical and the realistic. It must be emphasized, however, that the whole of the old saga literature from the preceding century lived on and was used. This demonstrates the comprehensive nature of manuscript production in the fourteenth century, and for us this is the most important source of the corpus of Old Norse literature. All in all the fourteenth century signified both an expansion of literature and a new orientation.

Even though there is no simple connection between the political change in 1264 and the literature that was written in the century before and the century after, it is natural to think that the spirit of the age, and with it the literature, was stamped by the development that led to the dissolution of the free state; but memories of the original, independent Iceland seem to have made a still stronger impression on the generations who copied and edited the sagas in later times.

THE LITERARY MILIEU

The organization of Icelandic society influenced both literary production and the way in which literature was used. Iceland had no single dominant cultural centre, and education and the work of authorship and copying were carried on in many places in the country, at chieftains' farms, in monasteries and at episcopal seats. The first bishop of Skálholt, Ísleifr Gizurarson, who had studied at Herford in Westphalia, established a training centre for priests, and training of a similar kind took place at the bishopric of Hólar. Benedictine monasteries were established at Þingeyrar in 1133 and at Munkaþverá in 1155, and in the

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succeeding decades many monasteries followed them. There were also private schools. Ísleifr's son Teitr ran a school at the chieftainly farm of Haukadalsr. It was here that Ari Þorgilsson got his education. At the neighbouring farm of Oddi, the learned Sæmundr, who, according to tradition, had studied in Paris, founded a school at the end of the eleventh century. Later Snorri Sturluson grew up on this farm. In the thirteenth century, education was carried on at Snorri Sturluson's farm at Reykholt and at other chieftains' farms. Books were undoubtedly written at all these places, and the heterogeneous seats of learning, with both ecclesiastical and secular aims and interests, promoted the varied nature of the literature. No single ruler or institution was able to monopolize or dominate the writing process, and we can assume that, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, having books written and owning them came to be part of an Icelandic magnate's prestige.

Variety was also a feature of the use of literature. A large proportion of manuscript codices were written at the initiative of private individuals and were the product of the large farms, where they were read aloud to the members of the household, which included men, women and children, the head of the household and his wife, servants and guests, the learned and the laity. This mixed group of listeners had an influence on the subject matter and point of view of the literature and contributed to the formation of its style. There would have been little purpose in reading Latin before such an audience, and the character of the sagas' public is the most important reason why the literature was composed in the Norse language. What Latin texts there were, were either translated into Old Norse, like Oddr Snorrason's history of Óláfr Tryggvason from about 1190, or have been lost. The practice of reading aloud on the farms also contributed to the formation of the sagas' oral rhetoric and objective style. Last, but not least, the oral narrative situation, of which the written sagas formed part, gave them their stamp of seeming to be true stories. The reader was the narrator and he would have to have answered for his narrative's credibility and ethical value.

LITERATURE AND SOCIETY: A SUMMARY

The history of the Icelanders during their first four hundred years passed through changes which, in the retrospective literary gaze of the

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succeeding period, were understood as rupture, loss and new beginning. The first rupture was the departure. The voyage out and the land-taking were the first generations' most significant experiences. The life they knew up to that point was cut off and a new existence had to be built up, not only in a material sense, but in a cultural and religious sense too. The land-taking laid the foundation for the Icelanders as a nation, and already in the construction and organization of the new society they had developed a consciousness of themselves as a distinct people. They must have felt the need to remember the time before the departure, including family lines, histories, the law, myths and the old poems, and that remembrance was carried forward into the age of writing, when it turned into literature.

The introduction of Christianity created a new historical consciousness and the country's most important common institutions were inscribed in texts by means of the written word. At the same time it was a decisive factor in the development of Icelandic literature that this early unified social vision was not sustained. In the following centuries it had to give way to a literature that went in the opposite direction and gave textual expression to the decentralized ideology which underlay Icelandic society from the very beginning. Writing was privatized and the result was the sagas of Icelanders and the contemporary sagas, which are characterized by their local and private settings. The forces that combined to shape the oldest literature were not continued. The work that went into editing the law was not carried further into the making of an officially authorized lawbook. That did not happen until the country had become a part of the Norwegian kingdom.² *Íslendingabók* seems not to have had any influence worth mentioning upon the thirteenth-century sagas about Iceland's past. We know it only from two seventeenth-century copies of a now lost manuscript from about 1200. The alphabetical reform advocated in *The First Grammatical Treatise* did not bring about any systematic consequences for written Icelandic (Benediktsson 1972: 25–8). Only *Landnámabók*, which approximated most closely in its organization to the sparsely distributed, non-hierarchical structure of Icelandic society, enjoyed a renaissance in the following centuries, but in new, up-to-date redactions, and in an almost intertextual relationship with the sagas of Icelanders.

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During the period of political disintegration in the first half of the thirteenth century and probably especially after the political changes of 1262–64, the past assumed a special lustre in the literature. The period between the land-taking and the change in religion was imbued with the quality of an Icelandic Golden Age, separated from and ethically distinct from the actualities of contemporary life. In the sagas of Icelanders that space was filled out with stories that developed the themes of the original society's ideals and problems, as the following ages saw them.

It was in the project of literature that the rupture of the past gained its historical meaning. The three major genres that comprise the Icelanders' stories about themselves and their forefathers, the sagas of ancient times or heroic sagas (*fornaldarsögur*), sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) and the contemporary sagas (*samtíðarsögur*), each created its own epoch by means of the era in which the action took place, in broad outline the time before the land-taking, the time between the land-taking and the change in religion, and the authorial present, from the beginning of the twelfth century until 1264. Icelandic literature was written in many phases and in changing ideological contexts. Seen as a whole, it is a textual recreation of times past. A self-conscious and well-educated class of farmers wrote narratives, which they considered to be true, about themselves, their ancestors and their achievements, and about the history of other countries, because they regarded it as part of their own. In this project all recollections of the past – narratives, skaldic poetry, eddic poetry, pre-Christian myths and foreign stories – were able to be absorbed.

NOTES

- 1 See especially ch. 6, 'Tekstualisering: Det islandske eksempel' ('Textualization: the example of Iceland').
- 2 The question is disputed, but see Foote 1977a: 201–5 and 1977b: 52–3.

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